

Let Us Start The Game

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Additional Tags:	because i couldn't stop imagining dream team as the phantom thieves , Will add tags as I go , Slow Burn , Persona 5 AU , Dungeon Crawling , School Life , Wilbur Soot - Freeform , there will be pretty dark themes such as suicide and sexual assault but not graphic , Phantom Thieves - Freeform , Original Characters - Freeform , phoenixsc - Freeform , smallishbeans , philza - Freeform , TommyInnit - Freeform , Metaverse , no need to know persona 5 to read , antfrost - Freeform , Nihachu - Freeform , Angst , coarse language , mentions of slurs
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Let Us Start The Game

by [Frost5ive](#)

Summary

Chips clinging, cards scattering.

People screaming, alarms blaring.

Dream tucks a hand into the pocket of his emerald coat, the other having thrown the briefcase, the Treasure, over his shoulder. He stands atop a chandelier, swaying as he watches the chaos unfold below.

Russian translation: <https://ficbook.net/readfic/10203786/26255896>

Notes

Persona 5 au with mcyt mainly dream team. Follows VERY CLOSELY the events of

Persona 5 Royal so don't read if u don't wanna get spoiled :)

I MAY come back to this but maybe not i mean i wrote it so that i can leave it as it is. BUT i can also continue this depends on my mood since im working on this super long devil survivor 2 fic rn and i know no one's into ds2 anymore but im at 200+ pages and im hardly through 1/4 of the story

anyway enjoy lol

A Gaudy Escape

Chips clinging, cards scattering.

People screaming, alarms blaring.

Dream tucks a hand into the pocket of his emerald coat, the other having thrown the briefcase, the Treasure, over his shoulder. He stands atop a chandelier, swaying as he watches the chaos unfold below.

“Dream! Get the hell outta there!” Dream flinches at George’s unholy shriek. George is always so loud.

“Yeah, you’d better start moving, Dream!” Skeppy calls.

“Fine, fine,” Dream mutters, smirking at the arrival of those uniformed men, armed with batons and walkie-talkies, pushing their way through the crowd. Dream leaps from the chandelier in a death-defying move, firing off that grappling hook, the wire screeching as it wraps around the chain anchoring another chandelier to the ceiling.

“There he is! Get him!”

“Ooh, they’ve seen you now.” Dream can almost imagine Sapnap with a bowl of popcorn in his hands, reclining against an armchair and watching his melodramatic display as Dream soars through the air, low enough for his heels to knock the berets off those officers. The wire pulls taut, and Dream is sent flying into the air, doing a dramatic loop and landing safely on another chandelier. He withdraws the grappling hook and leaps onto a nearby balcony.

“Dream!” George shouts. “Behind you!”

Dream’s body moves on instinct, hurling the briefcase into the air and doing a backflip, effectively kicking the Shadow in the face, the tips of his shoes sending the Shadow’s mask flying and disintegrating in the air. The briefcase lands in his hand, and the Shadow bursts into Moloch, the demon preparing to launch fireballs at him.

This doesn't look good .

Dream grabs the edge of his mask, the smiley face giving away to a dark, angry one, and a figure rises from behind him, dressed to the nines in a dapper fedora and a long, swaying coat that complements its tuxedo.

I am thou, thou art I. Use my power as you see fit to nullify the threat before you !

A thrust of a hand and a sphere of pure darkness later, the Moloch dissolves into ash, scattering into the air.

“Okay Dream, I’m sensing serious enemy readings around you right now,” George says. “Like, oh my God! Above you!”

Dream whips out his dagger and spins it between his fingers, hurling it at a Shadow like a dart hitting the bulls-eye, instantly killing it, the weapon hardly making a sound as it falls onto plush carpet. The other Shadow is stunned as Dream flashes it a grin. He snaps his pistol straight out from its holster and blasts at least ten holes in its amorphous body.

“Now’s your chance! Go!”

Dream meanders around, slotting his gun back into his holster and picking the dagger up. He wipes the blackened blood off it and sheathes the blade.

“George, you gotta tell me you love me first.”

George doesn’t play along this time.

“Just go! There are more coming, you idiot!”

Dream laughs. George can really scream sometimes. Sparing no more of his time, Dream hurries, sprinting up the stairs and into the staff-only area.

“Holy-” Dream stifles a gasp as he nearly runs right into another officer, throwing himself back and pressing his side against the wall, heart thundering in his chest as he waits for the officer to leave.

“You saw him? Where is he?”

Thump, thump, thump . The satisfying sound of heavyset rubber soles thundering against the tiled floor, running past Dream, totally missing him seemingly having become one with the wall. The officer throws the door open and rushes through, walkie-talkie in hand, and Dream takes his chance to barrel through the hallway.

Dream crashes through the door that opens up to a stairway, and he takes it, only to stop at the next floor and to find two guards just standing there, speaking to each other, only falling silent when they realise just who they’re looking at.

“Adios,” Dream holds up a hand and waves once before resuming his escape, running up the steps two at a time, the two guards yelling into their walkie-talkies, pistols out. Dream ducks just in time for a bullet to miss his head, searing into the wall right next to him. God, if he’d just been one second later...

Dream slams into the next door with his shoulder, pain arrowing through his arm, only to find himself cornered, standing at a balcony with no other way out. Behind him are two guards who halt abruptly, pistols cocked and safety off, fingers on the trigger.

How’s he gonna get out of this now?

“Give it up!” one of the guards shoot at the ceiling. A warning shot. Dream stifles a scoff.

Well, Dream’s just going to have to take this situation into his own hands. In one quick move, catching both officers off guard, he leaps onto the banister and begins sprinting, careful not to slip, and not to get shot. Bullets sail past him, crashing into walls, leaving smouldering marks behind.

Dream reaches the end of the railing, standing right next to a colourful artwork of the casino owner on stained glass.

“See ya!” Dream calls, braces himself with the briefcase tucked against his stomach and pulls one of his most aesthetic stunts, if he does say so himself. Glass shatters all around him, technicolour

shards raining all around him.

“DREAM!” George and Bad yell at the same time. Dream hopes George’s not experiencing a heart attack. They can’t continue on as Phantom Thieves without their navigator.

“Now he’s just trying to look cool,” Techno mutters.

Dream rolls on the ground, unharmed, the briefcase still safe with him. A beam of light blinds him, followed by more and more, sharp rays of light piercing his eyes. Lord, would it kill them to use dimmer lights?

Dream can hardly hear George or the others now, their distance from him a major factor in the static buzzing in his ears. He does what he does best.

Run.

He begins his sprint just as the officers converge, managing to make it to an emergency ladder conveniently dropped down to ground level. He ascends the ladder, snickering at the officers on his tail.

That is, until a foot meets his face.

Dream yelps and loses his grip on both the briefcase and the rung. He tumbles through the air, completely taken by surprise and lands harshly on his tailbone. Pain lances up his spine as an officer, or two, seizes him, clasping his wrists in handcuffs.

“You were sold out,” the burly officer informs him ever so courteously. “You gotta thank your teammate for this.”

Dream fixes him with a glare, but it’s not like the police can see his expression from behind the mask. George’s voice is completely absent now, as Dream is shoved into a police car, flanked by two officers, his mask having faded from his face, the officer’s last words ringing in his head.

You were sold out.

*

Take Your Time

Chapter Summary

When Dream gets captured, he's interrogated.

Chapter Notes

I don't know what made me do this i have limited knowledge of mcyt bc i mainly watch dream team but this is chap 2 out of a very very multichaptered fic with very very short chaps

hopefully i can continue this to the end but i might abandon this halfway

Also to marvelatmymajesty and Mira_Senpai, perhaps the traitor i mentioned isn't the traitor after all >W<

Prisoner number 508954TS.

Clay grunts as he's hurled against the ground, an officer's hard-soled shoe grinding into his cheek. Everything is a blur, a mix of colours and bright light and sharp noises-

"Hey, can you hear me?"

Clay squints against the piercing beams of fluorescent lighting and is immediately assaulted with a dagger of pain slicing through his temples. The officer kicks him once more in the stomach for good measure, tips of his shoes digging into Clay's stomach and sending him sprawling across the ground, coughing and hacking.

"Unlawful entry, armed assault and theft, arson, murder..." Another smartly-dressed man reads off a list, tapping his finger against the clipboard with every new charge. Clay can hardly respond, too focused on getting that ringing noise out of his head. "Man, talk about the works." He tosses the clipboard onto the table with a loud clack. "To be honest, we didn't expect to find that a *kid's* behind all this."

The officer squats down and grabs a fistful of Clay's hair. *This guy's got an ugly mug*, is the only thought that flits across Clay's mind before he hears the clink of metal and the pressure around his wrists is gone. Clay rubs at the dark bruise, staring at the blemish on his skin in a trance-like state when another clipboard is shoved into his face.

"All you gotta do is sign here," the officer says. "It's time kids like you learn that actions have consequences."

The words dance before his eyes, and Clay has to pinch the bridge of his nose a couple of times before it starts making sense. A signed confession, hmm? His hand begins to move not by his own will, scrawling his name as neatly as one can expect a drug-addled teenager to. The officer

snatches the clipboard and pen back as soon as he's done, and the head officer drags him up by the shoulders and forces him into a chair, a table between him and another chair. Clay glances up at the ceiling. There are security cameras here, naturally, but it's not like it's going to be useful to him.

"Anyway, the prosecutor in charge of your case is here to see you," the head officer says. He turns and leaves with the other, lesser officer, holding his signed confession like a prize he won at a carnival game. Clay sighs. One douchebag after another.

The door creaks open, and Clay looks up, meeting the disappointed gaze of, Sapnap's, well, Nick's, mother.

"I didn't think it would have been you," Mrs Armstrong says, and the door clicks shut behind her. Clay looks away.

"I'm really sorry it has come to this, but I have no time to spare." Mrs Armstrong whips out a file from her handbag and places it on the table. Clay already knows its contents before she even opens it.

"You are the leader of the Phantom Thieves, am I right?"

"So what if I am?" Clay hates how slurred he's sounding.

Mrs Armstrong fixes him with a concerned gaze, but says nothing besides, "Good, at least you're coherent enough." She flips the file open to one of its first few pages. A photograph of a man, a familiar blond man, falls out from between its pages. Clay loathes even looking at his face.

"I'd like you to tell me everything from the beginning, starting with your first target. I'm sure you know who he is, and I want to hear this heist in more detail."

"Even if I tell you, you won't believe me anyway," Clay says, ignoring the pounding in his head. *God, shut up brain!*

"That's for me to decide; you don't have a say in this," Mrs Armstrong shoots back, narrowing her eyes. "Now, tell me. How did you change this man's heart?"

Clay laughs internally. If he were anyone else, he'd probably have long since forgotten, but he recalls his first heist in stunningly vivid detail. The grandeur of the castle, the helplessness of his victims and the smugness and cruelty of Mr Krone before they stepped in and dealt him a number he'd never forget. His first job as the Phantom Thieves.

It started all the way back in April.

New Town, New Me

Chapter Summary

Dream moves to Fariold, a bustling city filled with flashing lights and busy streets a far cry from the quiet lifestyle of the countryside.

It's not for college, not for work.

It's for his criminal record.

Chapter Notes

Reminder that this fic follows VERY CLOSELY the events of Persona 5 Royal. If you don't want to be spoiled, pls don't read any further.

4/11 - SATURDAY - AFTERNOON

The train bustles and chugs along the tracks, passing in and out of tunnels and running along lush green hills and dips down valleys. Sunlight shines through the windows of the train shuttling along, casting ebony shadows against the opposing wall. The only passengers in the last carriage are a youth in a green hoodie and a middle-aged woman with a business coat, each minding their own business with a phone and a book. A stray page of yesterday's newspaper breezes past their feet, rustling till it reaches the end of the carriage.

An automated feminine voice booms through the speakers overhead.

"Next station, Wayvell Interchange. Change at this station for the North-East, Circle and East-West lines."

The train slows to a halt and Clay stands, heading towards the baggage area to collect his luggage, its green shell striking in the gloom of the train. He lugs it off onto the platform and glances around. The station is much bigger than he imagined, a sharp contrast to the one back at home, a seedy place overgrown with weeds and climbers.

Something knocks against his arm.

"Hey, watch where you're going," a lanky man in a suit huffs with a glare, stalking off without even giving Clay a chance to apologise. Clay scratches his head, dropping his head and follows the signs hanging overhead. He has to get to Jule Halls Residential District, where the family who is going to take him in stays.

They're not relatives, nor family friends. He can only wonder why they'd take him in. The Armstrongs, hmm?

Clay finds himself ascending and descending stairs littered with plastic bags and empty food containers, rushing along platforms with conductors and porters yelling into walkie-talkies and

packed into an elevator pressed up against strangers with barely any room to breathe. Eventually, he reaches the next platform of the East-West line, where the Jule Halls station waits at the end of the long route. Clay wishes he'd brought a book. Or something. His phone is nearly out of battery.

Clay ends up uncomfortably squashed between two passengers, his neon green luggage standing out in the crowd of commuters in drab coats and office wear. *Why*, he ponders, *must Jule Halls station be all the way at the end?*

Thankfully, the crowd starts to thin once he bypasses the Enderlands station, which is, apparently, an interchange as well, but many more people alighted than boarded, and Clay fishes out his phone once the train begins its journey once more. He texts Mrs Armstrong, informing her that he'd be arriving soon, and sinks back against his seat. For some reason, he just wants to close his eyes and, maybe, never wake up.

"Next station, Jule Halls. I repeat, next station, Jule Halls. This is the last station of the East-West line."

Clay blinks awake. God, he *did* fall asleep. The carriage is empty, apart from himself. He rubs at his eyes and realises his luggage has nearly rolled into the other carriage, stopped only by a glass door. He retrieves his luggage just as the train jerks to a stop, sending him sprawling to the ground, the luggage toppling beside him.

This is going to be a long, *long* year.

Clay picks himself up, breathes a sigh of relief when there's no one around to witness his blunder and hurries out the train's doors, emerging out onto a deserted platform, and checks his phone. Mrs Armstrong texted him an address. Clay puffs his cheeks out. He probably doesn't have any right to even think this, but he wishes she'd at least come and show him the way on his first day here.

Clay shoves a hand into his hoodie as a cold draft blows. Jesus, they're in the midst of spring and it's still this chilly. He leaves the station, mourning the cost of the trip, and sets out in search of the house he will spend the next year in.

*

4/11 - SATURDAY- EVENING

Clay clenches and unclenches his fists, then wipes a sweaty palm against his hoodie, scuffing his shoes, before raising a hand to knock against the door. The dull knock summons whom Clay believes to be Mrs Armstrong, dressed in a business suit (in the house?). She wears a stern expression, and the living room is eerily quiet.

"You're late."

Nice to meet you too, Clay mutters in his head. He merely shrugs. "The trains were running late."

She hums noncommittally, but steps aside to let him in nonetheless. "Take off your shoes when you come in. You'll be sharing a room with Nick."

Nick? Who's that? Clay hopes it's not a pet. Unless it's a cat. He's good with cats.

She makes no move to help him drag his luggage up the staircase, only expressed disapproval when the wheels seemingly scratch the glossy wood. He is led to the end of the hallway, to a door with a wooden sign hanging from a nail, only one word scribbled in black marker on it: Sappnap. Mrs Armstrong raps her knuckles on the door. "Nicholas! Clay is here! I expect you have gotten

the room ready?"

There is a loud thud from inside, and Clay watches in faint amusement as the door is pulled open and a dishevelled youth, not much older than himself, appears. He's dressed in a white wrinkled hoodie, a grey collar peeking out, and a pair of black slacks. Nick - Sapnap? - rubs at his eyes. "I-I cleaned it up. Oh, you must be, uh, Clay."

Mrs Armstrong folds her arms. "I'll leave you two to it. Clay, I want to see you after dinner to set some ground rules."

That sounded ominous. Mrs Armstrong turns the corner and heads down the stairs, leaving both Clay and Nick standing awkwardly at the entrance to the bedroom. Nick breaks the silence, laughing quietly.

"She's a little scary, huh?"

Clay finds himself smiling. "Yeah."

Nick lets him in, shutting the door behind them. There is a heavy musk in the air, accentuated by the stuffiness. Has the window ever been opened before? Gadgets lie strewn across the expanse of the floor, and wires run parallel to the bunk bed. A giant computer on a desk sits at the farthest corner of the room, just below the window. A wardrobe and a shelf are decorated with trinkets, tiny action figurines and random mementos like a photo frame and a key chain. The wall, surprisingly, lacks posters of any sort.

After unpacking his things, placing them in spaces where Nick has partially cleared out, they are called for dinner. Leftover pasta from lunch. Mrs Armstrong mentions briefly that she has to attend an online meeting in a couple of minutes and promptly leaves for her office upstairs.

"Is that normal?" Clay asks.

"Yeah, don't worry about it."

They fall into silence, the only sounds clinking spoons against porcelain plates smeared with tomato sauce. Nick washes the plates while Clay dries them, finishing just in time to hear Mrs Armstrong calling from upstairs.

"Don't die."

Clay cracks a small smile. "Thanks."

They've only been exchanging single sentences, but Clay can already sense the budding seedling of a potential kinship with Nick (bonding over his scary mother). He steels himself as he takes the stairs one at a time, pushing open the door to her office.

Well, a full-on glare isn't what he was expecting. Clay swallows thickly as he averts his gaze. If looks can kill, he'd be dead several times over. Instead, he fidgets behind his back, waiting for her spiel on the "ground rules".

"Don't teenagers know how to knock nowadays?" she huffs. Oops. That is totally on him. She sighs and she swivels back to face her laptop. "I just want you to know that I don't tolerate any from of delinquency here. At all. If I deem that you are ever out of line, you are heading straight to juvenile hall. Am I clear?"

Clay dislodges that ball of saliva in his throat. "Y-Yes, ma'am."

"And don't call me ma'am; that makes me feel old," Mrs Armstrong mutters. "Mrs Armstrong would do."

"Yes ma'a" - Clay coughs as Mrs Armstrong raises a brow - "I-I mean, Mrs Armstrong."

"Good. Now, I hope you know that in this household, you're expected to do chores. You'll be taking out the trash and washing dishes. Every day." The rest of the talk is as boring as Clay figured it'll be. Curfew is at seven p.m., you have to write a probation diary that documents your actions every day, take off your shoes when you're inside the house - socks are fine - and she is *not* giving him pocket money outside of tuition fees (find a part-time job if you want some spending money). No shirking schoolwork, no playing truant.

"Tomorrow, we are registering you at Enderlands High, so you'd better be ready by seven," Mrs Armstrong says. Clay blinks. Already? Is the school even open tomorrow? And Enderlands High? What kind of school is it? Public? Private?

"I will."

"That's good." If Clay thought she'd smile, he's dead wrong. She shoos him out and tells him to ask Nick for supper if he wants any. Suddenly, a wave of fatigue washes over him, and Clay decides it's probably time to retire for the night. By the time he makes it to Nick's room - or rather, *their* room, all he wants to do is to just lie on the bed and knock himself out. Meanwhile, Nick is on that giant computer, fingers flying across the keyboard, the constant clack-clack a somewhat soothing rhythm.

"How was the talk?" Nick asks, barely sparing Clay a glance as Clay strips his hoodie and climbs to the top bunk, apparently untouched. He lays down, fingers clasped on his stomach.

"As great as you'd expect it to be."

"Sounds awful."

"It's not that bad. I think your mom is an intelligent woman."

Nick scoffs, and they lapse into silence again, lacking even the tapping of fingernails on the keyboard. There is a shuffle, and the glow of the monitor disappears. The curtains are tugged close, disallowing even the smallest sliver of light through. The bed wobbles slightly.

"Tomorrow's Sunday. I can show you around the neighbourhood."

"I need to go register at my school first, though."

"After that, then. There's this Diner O' Chicken around here that makes a mean chicken sandwich." Pause. "What school are you going to?"

"Huh?" Clay searches in the deep recesses of his mind for the name he heard mere minutes ago. "Enderlands? Or something?"

"Thought so. I go there too," Nick says. "It's a prep school, so the company's kinda good. It's a little stressful, but nothing I can't handle."

Their conversation continues for the longest time. With every word, every laugh, Clay can understand Nick just a little more.

Just, maybe, living here won't be so bad after all.

Welcome to the Velvet Room

Chapter Summary

Clay wakes up to the sound of jangling chains and the faint chorus of a choir.

Chapter Notes

super short chappie

4/12 - SUNDAY - MORNING

Enderlands High is the most grandiose building that Clay has ever seen. A massive school gate opens into a beautiful courtyard displaying an array of colourful flower beds. A cobblestone path leading them straight up to the main building as well as several campuses scattered about the grounds. Mrs Armstrong strides into the school building like she owns the place (not surprising if she *did*), but since it is a Sunday, there aren't that many people around.

Clay follows behind Mrs Armstrong, eventually coming to a set of glass double doors that opens up into a sparsely-furnished office, currently occupied by a bald man looking to be in his late forties and a younger, bespectacled man in a suit. The bald man appears to be the principal, from what Clay deduced from Mrs Armstrong's one-sided conversation with the man, settling, perhaps, some administrative matters.

"I heard you have a criminal record," the principal says, clasping his pudgy fingers in front of him. "You should be grateful that we are willing to take you in, to give you another chance at life."

Clay huffs internally. He may have a criminal record, but he didn't do anything wrong! A part of him wants to seethe, wants to grab the nearest object and hurl it at the smug man sitting in front of him, but the more rational part of him stops him. He does *not* want to get banished to juvenile hall so early in his probation. He merely nods, shuffling about on the spot while the principal and the other man, presumably a teacher, sizes him up.

"In any case, here is your student card and student pass," the principal says, gesturing at the teacher, who hands Clay a card with his full name and face on it. Clay pockets it, listens to the rest of the principal's monologue on how great the school is. His ears are only spared when Mrs Armstrong puts her foot down. The principal gives them an insincere smile and bids them goodbye. The teacher waves as well, which Clay manages to catch sight of before the doors close behind them.

*

4/12 - SUNDAY - DAYTIME

"There has been a new case of what the police deem to be 'mental shutdowns' that have been occurring over the past few months..."

"Scary, huh?"

Clay snaps out of his trance at Nick waving a hand in front of him. Clay registers the burger in his hands before proceeding to chomp down on it. Nick had brought him around the neighborhood, letting him know where the nearest convenience store, movie theatre, supermarket and the best chicken joint are. Jules Hall isn't a big place, and after a while, Clay feels as if he's been living here for his entire life.

"What's scary?"

Nick leans back against the cushy backrest. "The mental shutdowns."

"Oh. That." There hadn't been such incidents back in his town, so Clay thought it may be a city thing. "What's it about?"

"Haven't you heard? People have been experiencing this thing called a mental shutdown," Nick says. "They just...stop moving, stop thinking...and there's all this black liquid and stuff..."

"I'm still eating," Clay says, jabbing a finger at his burger, and Nick laughs.

The rest of the meal passes by in relative silence.

They emerge from the joint more than satisfied, and begin to make their way ba-

Clay's eyes widen.

A blue flame dances in the distance, at the end of the long road. He stands rooted to the spot, staring down two crimson eyes that appear from within the flame.

"Nick, are you seeing this?"

No response. Clay turns towards his friend, letting out an audible gasp when he finds Nick frozen mid-stride, an arm bent at the elbow, fingers outstretched, mouth open.

"Do not be afraid." A deep, scratchy voice speaks in his head. The voice dissolves into laughter, a throaty laughter that sends chills down Clay's spine. The blue flame dissipates, leaving only the same deep voice saying, "We will surely meet again." The bloodshot eyes are the last to go, fizzling out like fireballs into cinders. Except without the fire and cinders.

"Were you listening?"

Clay tilts his head. "Uh, yeah."

Nick stares at him as if he's grown two heads, but dismisses whatever idea he's had and continues telling Clay about his recent gaming exploits. Clay rubs his nape. That was strange, and possibly a simple hallucination. The earlier he gets it out of his head, the better.

The rest of the way back to the Armstrong residence is uneventful, and Clay crashes into the bed as soon as he reaches Nick's room, throwing his hoodie over his eyes and willing himself to sleep off the emerging migraine.

*

??/? - ??? - MIDNIGHT

Clink. Clank.

Clay blinks awake. The musk of Nick's room has been replaced by a faint lavender aroma, accompanied by a choir. Clay sits up and rubs at his eyes before glancing around. He appears to be in a blue room of sorts, caged in like a zoo animal. The only things of note happen to be a toilet bowl in the far corner of his evident jail cell, the bed he is sitting on and a heavy metal ball right beside him, linked to a chain that clasps his ankle. It is only now that Clay notices that he has somehow changed into a prisoner's outfit, those black-and-white striped kinds. What in the world are all these? Is he dreaming?

"Welcome to my Velvet Room."

Clay snaps his head towards the nasally voice. It is deep, even deeper than the voice he heard earlier in the day. Clay stands and makes his way to the door, a door made of metal bars, resembling those in prison cells.

"Who are you?" Clay asks, hating how shaky his voice sounds, but everything here is just too magical for him not to feel the least bit unnerved about.

"My name is Igor, and I am the master of this place," the long-nosed man says. He sits cross-legged at his desk in the middle of a circular room, surrounded by prison cells not unlike Clay's. He taps his fingers on the table as he observes Clay with those saucer-like eyes of his. Clay squints. There are two humanoid shapes behind him that he cannot fully make out...

"It is time to start your rehabilitation," Igor says, drawing Clay's attention back to him. *Rehabilitation?* Igor seems to be able to read his mind, because he chuckles and continues. "Indeed. The world is approaching ruin, and the only way this can be avoided is if you complete your rehabilitation and prevent it."

"Ruin? Rehabilitation? What do you mean?" Clay asks, a note of frustration in his voice, because this man in his dream dares confuse him with such cryptic messages? Goddamn it. This man is a figment of his imagination. He's *not even real!*

"Ah, where are my manners?" Igor says, spreading his arms wide, and the two figures that Clay could barely make out earlier step into the dim lighting. They are two girls almost identical in appearance, with the exception of their hairdo and the eye they wear an eye patch over.

"This one is Justine," Igor says, gesturing towards the girl with braids. "And this is Caroline." The other girl with twin buns brandishes the mean-looking baton she is holding. Both of them don a warden's cap over their heads and are clad in a blue uniform top and black shorts. "They are the attendants to this room. They will aid you in your rehabilitation."

"You'd better thank the master for this great opportunity, inmate!" Caroline says, her voice as explosive as a raging tornado.

"Indeed. You should be grateful," Justine says, her demeanor a sharp contrast to Caroline's, calm as a flowing river.

"You need not know the details now," Igor says with a wave of his hand. "It is time for you to return to your world."

"W-Wait!" Clay shouts, but he is already losing consciousness, sinking to his knees, the world spinning around him. A choir's soprano gives way to a painful ringing in his ears, and the last thing Clay remembers of the fantastical encounter is the clinging scent of lavender to his clothes.

4/13 - MONDAY - EARLY MORNING

A set of clothes is tossed into Clay's face as Clay sits bolt upright, slamming his hand on his abused alarm clock, shutting off the ringing. Nick looks up at him in curiosity, but the expression lasts no more than a few seconds.

"That's your uniform," Nick says without missing a beat. "Get changed and washed up in five minutes, and we'll be waiting for you in the living room."

It does not make Clay any happier that Nick is already prepared and has probably eaten breakfast. Clay climbs out of bed begrudgingly. Mornings are not meant for people to be peppy. That being said, he did turn in really early yesterday, but for some reason, Clay just feels...exhausted.

Nevertheless, the idea of being sent to juvenile hall motivates him to crawl out of bed, dash to the bathroom, taking his first step of success on his first day of school.

Captured

Chapter Summary

Clay and Nick take a wrong turn on the way to school.

Chapter Notes

I've somehow turned this into a sort of 45-minute writing exercise thing every day lol

4/13 - MONDAY- EARLY MORNING

"This sucks."

Clay leans against the wall, under the eaves of a shop still closed, while Nick tries to squeeze dry a portion of his uniform. The rain comes down in torrents, splashing onto the sidewalk.

"Tell me about it," Clay mumbles, not looking up from his phone. It's there again, this creepy icon of an eye on his phone. He found it somehow installed on his phone, under the name MetaNav, but he doesn't remember actively installing it. He's never even heard of such an app before. He *did* try to uninstall it, which worked for a couple of hours, only to find it re-installed on his phone. The time is nearly eight. In a few minutes, they're going to be marked as late, and Clay does *not* want to be late on his first day of school.

A car pulls up to the station, and Clay watches as a man winds down the window - the same man, teacher, standing in the office just yesterday - and calls out to someone behind them. Clay turns, watching a boy in the Enderlands uniform walk up to the car, his hands tucked into his pockets.

"It's raining," the teacher says. "You should hitch a ride with me."

The boy seemingly hesitates, but does climb into the passenger seat. The teacher seems to notice them as well, and waves with a smile. "Do you want a ride as well?"

Clay is about to accept the offer, considering the terrible situation they are in right now, but Nick immediately replies, "No thanks, we're good."

The teacher cocks his head but says nothing more. "I'll see you at school then."

There is something not quite right about the smile he wears, the way the boy in the passenger seat refuses to even meet their gazes. The car's engine revs once more and the teacher drives off, headed towards the school.

"That guy's bad news," Nick says, eyeing the spot where the car was parked. "Rumour has it he abuses students."

"He was nice enough to offer us a ride."

Nick sighs, shaking his head. "That's 'cause he was trying to get into your pants. That Peter Kronos. He thinks he can do anything he wants, like he's the king of a castle. Enderlands doesn't belong to him."

Coordinates found. Beginning navigation.

Clay glances behind him. He could have sworn he heard a voice.

"I say we just run there. We can always dry out our uniforms later," Nick says. The rain has lessened, a drizzle compared to the downpour earlier. Nick grabs Clay's hand, and they run. The street is slippery, the puddles soaking their sneakers as their bags thump against their backs. Once or twice, one of them nearly falls, but eventually, they make it to Enderlands High safe and sound.

Or at least, Clay thinks they did. For some reason, the rain has stopped though the pitter-patter drones on. He merely stares at the building before them, a magnificent castle standing beyond the school gate, a lowered drawbridge beckoning them in. This isn't the Enderlands High that Clay just came to the other day. The Enderlands High he remembers isn't a castle. It was grand, but not to this extent.

"Are you sure we didn't take a wrong turn?" Clay asks.

Nick's eyes flick to the sign of the school on the wall. There is no mistaking it. This *is* Enderlands High. Nick chuckles uncertainly. "Maybe there's some special event we don't know about."

Clay hums and says nothing, padding after Nick as the latter makes his way inside the school. The gates slam closed, startling them. There's no going back now. They press on forward, wandering past the drawbridge and into the castle.

The interior of the castle is exactly what Clay pictured it'd look like. A chandelier hangs from the ceiling, bathing the room in a romantic, yellow glow. There are statues carved from marble, potted plants and bookshelves fitted in tight corners. The carpet is plush beneath their feet, golden threads sewn into their edges.

"This isn't Enderlands," Nick says, scratching his head. Clay figured as much.

"The sign did say it was."

They wander further into the hall, approaching a giant portrait past a steep staircase. Nick makes a face. Clay remembers the person in the portrait as the teacher, the one who offered them a ride. The painting is terribly flashy, portraying the teacher as a knight in shining armour, holding a sword as he does battle with a menacing green dragon.

"This is messed up," Nick says. "Look, let's go back. I've got a bad feeling about this place."

Clay is about to point out that the school gates have closed, trapping them here, but Nick is already pulling on his arm, leading him rather forcefully towards the exit.

"Who goes there?"

Nick stops, and Clay almost bumps into him. Peering over Nick's shoulder, he sees a cluster of guards in a full suit of armour, each holding a sword and a shield.

"Who are you?" Nick asks, voice trembling ever so slightly. These guards are tall, way taller than either of them, and those swords look *very, very* real.

"That's my line," the guard says, pointing its sword at them. "Who dares tread uninvited into His Majesty's castle?"

"His Majesty?"

"That's right."

Clay glances around them. More guards begin to appear from pits of darkness in the ground, each wearing the same blue mask and holding the same, sharp blade. The person who had just spoken in a silky lilt emerges from behind the group of guards, nothing but a fur cape tucked around his shoulders, held together by a golden clasp. A crown sits atop his head. Clay knows that face, because he just saw it a few moments ago.

The man standing in front of them is none other than the teacher, Mr Krones. Gone is the omnipresent polite smile, replaced by a sneer. "What do we have here? Lowly rats who decide to worm their way into my castle? Unacceptable."

"Rats? We're not-why are you wearing that?" Nick looks more confused than afraid, though the fear is definitely there.

"Silence!" Mr Krones bellows, throwing an arm out. "I'll show you what happens to people who defy me!"

"W-Watch out!" Clay barrels into Nick, sending both of them sprawling to the ground, narrowly dodging a guard's sword. Still, it was meaningless to resist, as there are too many guards. Nick goes down first from a powerful kick to the gut, and Clay follows shortly after from a sword's hilt to his temple. He crashes to the ground, the world blurring around him. Black dots dance at the edge of his vision, growing in number and size, till there is nothing left but the sound of the guards shouting and the maniac laughter of Mr Krones.

*

Clay awakens to the stench of soil and burning coals. He sits, propping himself up on his elbows, lifting his head to see Nick lying sprawled on the ground as well, unmoving. While there are no external wounds on him as far as Clay can see, he still fears the worst and shakes Nick's shoulder vigorously.

"H-Hey, wake up!" Clay loathes that crack in his voice. "Nick!"

Clay breathes an audible sigh of relief when Nick stirs, blinking away the sleep. "W-Where?"

With Clay's help, Nick leans against the wall, a hand on his stomach where the guard had kicked him. Clay takes this moment to look around, pretending not to hear the pitiful screams in the distance amidst clanking metal. They are stuck in a dungeon cell (*Again?*) fitted with handcuffs to the wall and a stone bed meant for one. Clay distinctly hears the cracking of whips as he nears the barred metal door. Could his dream have been foreshadowing?

"Something's really wrong here," Nick says, shaking his head, on the verge of hysteria.

"Something's seriously wrong here!"

Clay has to agree. It's not every day you wander about in a modern city and come across a castle with soldiers that look like they've popped out from a history book. Besides, the masks on those guards, those unfeeling guards, were just so *creepy*...He squeezes his eyes shut. This is no time to be thinking about such things! He can worry about his sanity later when they're out of here.

"Looks like the scum are awake."

Clay looks up to see Krones sauntering over to their cell, flanked by two guards. Upon command, one of the guards retrieves a key from within its armour and unlocks the cell door. Clay and Nick shrink back against the furthest corner of the cell, watching helplessly as the guards advance. One of them grabs Clay's hair, metallic claws digging into his scalp, pinpricks of pain shooting through his skull. Clay winces as the guard adjusts its grip, this time clutching Clay's neck and yanking him into the air.

Clay wheezes for air as the guard's grip tightens, cutting off his air flow. Blood rushes in his veins, coursing loudly through his ears as his wheezes turn into gasps, limbs losing strength, his struggles getting weaker and weaker...

"Leave him alone!"

A sudden knockback causes the guard to release Clay who falls to the ground, coughing and gulping down delicious oxygen. The world begins to clear, Krones' sniggering becoming louder and louder...

No!

Now they have Nick on the ground, a blade's tip held to his neck.

"Since you want to die so much, then die!" Krones laughs.

Clay has no idea where this burst of courage is coming from, but one moment he was on the ground, forgotten, and the next he rushes Krones. Unfortunately, he does not get very far before he is accosted by the other guard. His back is pressed flush against the guard's icy breastplate, the handle of the spear against his neck.

"Annoying brat," Krones mutters. "It'll be your turn soon." He turns to the guard preparing to execute Nick. "Now, kill him!"

Clay's eyes are wide, his heart thundering in his chest. No, no, no, no! The guard raises the sword's blade over Nick's neck.

"NOOOOOOOOOO!"

The First Awakening

Chapter Summary

I am thou, thou art I

Chapter Notes

i apologise for the low quality chapters and i think the storys moving a lil fast for my taste

4/13 - MONDAY - MORNING

I am thou, thou art I.

It is as if the wind is knocked out of Clay's lungs, breaths coming short and quick as pain sears through his head. It's as if an anvil is being dropped on him, crushing his skull, burning the backs of his eyes.

What's the matter? Are you simply going to watch? Death awaits him if you do nothing.

Clay grunts, chest heaving, a hand grasping at his breast. There's a fire prancing about within him, inflicting a pain so intense that has Clay tossing his head back, eyes squeezed shut, sweat rolling down his cheeks.

Was your previous decision a mistake then?

"No..."

Flashes of the woman he saved, the man who shouted at him, the rough grip of the officers as they drag him away into the police car rise from the depths of his memories. Memories that he wanted to forget. Was he wrong in saving her?

No. He's not wrong. He has to believe it.

Very well, I have heeded your resolve. Thou art willing to perform all sacrilegious acts for thine own justice! Call upon my name and release thy rage! Show the strength of thy will to ascertain all on thine own, though thou be chained to Hell itself!

A mask appears over his eyes, covering his nose but ending right above his upper lip. It is almost instinctive, what he does next, as if it's what he's meant to do. Fingers grip the edges of the mask, held fast to his skin, almost like super glue on paper, and Clay rips it off in one graceful move. Blood sprays from the raw skin beneath the mask, which fades into flames of blue, knocking back the guard holding him with its spear.

Clay feels so...liberated. Like a bird emerging from its cage, spreading its wings for the first time in the pitch blackness of the night. A forest-green coat billows around him, like a cloak lighter than

air itself. A mystical figure appears in front of him, a top hat adorning its head, feathery appendages sprouted from its back. It wears a perpetual smile, eyes nothing more than red slits carved into its blackened face.

This is the owner of the voice that Clay heard yesterday, the being who had stopped time. There is no mistaking it.

Clay tugs at the red gloves on his hands, actual emeralds fitted into the knuckles. "Show me what you can do, Arsene."

Arsene cackles. *Very well, I will lend you my aid.*

With a mighty flap of its wings, Arsene blows the guards away, along with Krones. Clay runs over to Nick. "Hey, are you alright?"

Nick's face looks somewhat bruised, a hand absently touching his neck where the sword's blade nearly sunk into his flesh. "I'm fine." Just shaken. He scoops up a key from the ground which must have dropped from the guard's hand. "Quick, we have to go!"

As soon as they're out, Nick slams the metal door shut and locks it behind him. Krones screeches, wrapping his thin, spindly fingers around the bars and yelling expletives.

"Run!" Clay shouts, and Nick hurls the key into the sewers, and follows Clay. The sewers smell terrible, all manner of foul garbage flowing along in the grey water beside them. Clay zigzags through the dirt paths, leaping over debris in the water to reach the opposite bank. His body barely weighs a gram, his legs and arms moving on their own as he leaps off metal cages, swerving left and right to avoid guards who are apparently on the lookout for them.

"W-Wait!"

Clay glances behind to find Nick struggling to keep up. Nick bends over, grabbing his kneecaps as he pants. "Y-You're...too fast, man!"

"We have to get out of here."

"Yeah, but...spare a thought for...whoa."

Nick is staring at him, awe in his eyes. Clay looks down at himself. When did his clothes change? He recalls the green coat and the red gloves, but the rest- a black waistcoat and pants that cling to his legs - are a surprise. Not to mention that he now has mask on his face, the same mask that he had removed earlier to summon his power.

"What's with that get-up?" Nick has a hand on his hip. Clay shrugs. At the sound of guards' footsteps, however, Clay dashes forth in a burst of speed, adrenaline running through his veins. Nick curses and follows behind. Clay digs his heels into the dirt, stopping in front of a large, raised drawbridge with no obvious lever to lower it.

"Great, now what?" Nick is at his wits' end, throwing glances behind him. The guards are not here yet, but they are so close...oh, they are so close. Now what?

"Hey! Over here!"

A voice catches their attention. It appears to come from a jail cell just a few steps away. Clay and Nick exchange glances.

"I know how to get out!"

Clay approaches the cell, Nick right behind him. As it turns out, the prisoner is a small animal, a bipedal fox, to be exact.

"What *are* you?" Nick asks.

"Does that matter right now?" the fox cries. "I know how to get out of here, so let me out! The key's just there!" The fox gestures to its right, at a set of keys hanging on the wall outside the cell, just slightly out of the fox's reach.

"What's your call?" Nick asks.

It isn't even a question. There's no time to waste.

"You'd better not be lying," Clay mutters, grabbing the keys. If this creature proves to be untrustworthy, they can just deal with it later, especially with his newfound power. Clay turns the key in the hole and the door swings open, rusted metal gates screeching against the stone. The fox scampers out of the cell, stretching its limbs.

"Ah, sweet freedom!" The fox heads on over to the drawbridge and approaches an ugly stone bust of Krones' face that Clay must have missed. It knocks three times on the statue's mouth, revealing a lever hidden within the statue. Clay pulls the lever, and the bridge is lowered, granting them passage to another hallway just across the sewer water.

"There they are!"

A bunch of guards rush up to them, black liquid oozing from their orifices and transforming them into monsters - a specter holding a lantern with a pumpkin for a head and a fairy, each targeting them with sparks of electricity and balls of fire. Clay sidesteps to his left, avoiding the fireball that bursts into embers. Nick plasters himself against the railing. The fox, on the other hand, leaps into the air, a blue shadow springing to life behind it.

"Zorro!"

At the call, a gust of wind blows around them, both the fairy and the pumpkin head bursting into black ash. The fox's unique shadow disappears and it lands on the ground, a smirk on its face. Clay and Nick can only stare after it as it continues running past the door, up the staircase. Clay summons Arsene, sending a ball of darkness into the ceiling. The flimsy stonework crumbles upon impact and collapses, trapping the guards on the other end.

"In here!" The fox throws open a door, a door that seemingly *wavers*, and enters it. With no other choice, and the sound of even more guards approaching, Clay and Nick follow it. The door clicks shut, and Nick sinks with his back against it.

"Let's rest here for a bit," the fox says, leaning back against a velvet couch, at ease with the whole situation.

Clay blinks. Is it just him, or does it seem to be a distortion in space? Maybe he's imagining it, but could this space be some kind of...storage room?

"Okay, I've got a thousand questions," Nick says. "Who are you? *What* are you? What is this place? What kind of power-"

"Whoa, whoa." The fox holds up a paw, tail flicking. "Too many questions."

Clay sits down opposite the fox, legs kicked up on the small coffee table between them, his arms folded. "Who are you?"

"Well, the name's Floris," the fox says, grinning, "and I have the same power as you."

Back to Normal?

Chapter Summary

something of an explanation chap. dialogue heavy

Chapter Notes

for people who played p5/p5r, dream/clay = joker, fundy/floris = morgana, sapnap/nick = ryuji currently

social links/confidant events may be similar but not totally the same

4/13 - MONDAY - MORNING

"Wait, so you have a...a name?" Nick starts.

Floris bristles. "What do you mean a name? I'm a human! Of course I have a name!"

Clay reaches over, fingertips barely brushing the tip of Floris' ears when the fox shrinks back. "Don't do that."

"Oh. Sorry."

"Anyway," Floris says, "you have that power too, don't you? The power of your Persona."

"Is that what it's called?" Clay says, leaning back against the couch once more, this time joined by Nick. He clenches a fist, remembering the lightness of his body, the grace of his movements, the raw power of that supernatural being, when he had awakened Arsene.

"Yeah." Floris nods. "It's basically a manifestation of your rebellious spirit."

Rebellious spirit?

"My brain hurts," Nick mutters, sinking into the couch.

"We can't stay here forever," Floris says, jumping to its feet. "I think the Shadows are gone now."

"Shadows?" Clay asks, peeling himself off the couch.

"Those guards are, as you'd call them, supernatural creatures," Floris says. "They're Shadows, and they'll chase you down relentlessly. Basically, they're the Palace ruler's servants."

"The Palace ruler?"

Floris sighs heavily. "I'll tell you more when we get out of here, okay?" With that, Floris opens the door a crack and when he confirms that the coast is clear, he strides out, Clay and Nick right behind him. The hallway is just as quiet as Clay expected it to be, with no enemies in sight. Floris

sets off towards another twisting hallway, leading them past several jail cells not dissimilar to their own.

"Hey, wait!"

"What?" Floris cries, exasperated. He and Clay halt just in front of a drawbridge that would take them to another staircase. "We don't have time to be dilly-dallying!"

"It's just..." Nick's voice trails off as he stares at a humanoid figure sitting with their knees drawn up to their chest, head bowed. "I *think* I know these people."

"So you do," Floris drawls, clearly uninterested. "Come on, hurry!"

"But we can't just leave them here!" Nick cries.

"They're not real. They're just...ugh, you know what, I'm outta here." Without another word, Floris scampers off. Clay's hands are tucked into his pockets as he watches Nick glance between the figure in the cell and Floris' slowly-disappearing back.

"Shit!" Nick hisses, and makes after Floris, Clay right behind him. They head up the stairs. Reaching the top presents them with a sight for sore eyes - the entrance hall to the castle. It is empty, just like how it was when they first entered. Nick heads over to the door and pulls at it, even ramming his shoulder against it, but the door remains shut tight.

"What are you doing?" Floris hisses, padding over.

"I'm trying to get us out of here." Nick glares at him. "The door's shut!"

Floris sighs and shakes his head. Clay can even sense Floris' apparent disappointment from here, stifling a laugh. Floris sets off towards the hallway at the far end of the hall. Nick sighs, meets Clay's eyes briefly, and they run after Floris.

Floris turns into a tiny room, containing nothing but bookcases. A breeze tickles Clay's neck.

"It's a dead end!" Nick cries.

"Are you stupid?" Floris mutters.

"I heard that!"

Floris pays Nick no attention and turns to Clay. "Please tell me at least you get it."

Clay gestures to the air vent, where the gust of wind is whistling through. One powerful kick later and the vent's metal grate snaps from place, clanking as it falls to the ground.

"This should lead you to the outside," Floris says. "Now, if you'd excuse me."

"Aren't you trying to escape too?" Nick asks.

Floris grins, baring his razor teeth. "I've got a little investigation to do here, so I'm staying. Ciao!" Floris runs off, out of the room, leaving Clay and Nick no choice but to climb through the vent. The vent is narrow and dusty. The wind bats against their faces, forcing Clay to squint as he worms his way past the twisting air vents. Eventually, he reaches the end, tumbling out onto the ground.

"Ow," Nick groans, hitting the ground after Clay. Clay rubs at his backside and he stands, glancing around him. This is exactly where they had come in from - they're at the front of the castle. The

drawbridge is still lowered over the moat, and the school gates are open now.

"Come on, let's get outta here," Clay says, and strides towards the gates.

*

4/13 - MONDAY - AFTERNOON

"Wait, isn't this-" Nick starts.

They're back at the train station. By now, the morning crowd has thinned, leaving them rather conspicuous in the near-empty train station.

"Oh crap," Nick says, glancing at his phone. "We're hella late. Lord, my mum's gonna kill me."

Late? By how much? Clay checks his phone, brow furrowed, his heart nearly skipping two beats when he realises that it's past lunch time. For one, he's rather hungry. Secondly, he's on fucking probation and he's four hours late on his first day of school.

God help him.

"At the very least, we can still show up," Nick says. He sighs, eyes cast on the ground, and Clay can't say he blames him.

The mood is sombre as they trudge to school.

*

4/13 - MONDAY - AFTERNOON

"Late on your first day?"

Clay shrugs. "Sorry."

It's still strange, seeing a Mr Krones sitting here, dressed in his normal business suit unlike that outlandish outfit he wore at the castle - which was nothing but a royal fur cape and a set of shocking pink briefs. It's almost as if he had no idea what went on in the castle. Unless he's playing dumb.

It must be fate, or pure dumb luck, that Mr Krones happens to be his homeroom teacher.

"I'm not even talking five minutes late," Mr Krones says, sighing and bent over his desk. "I could report you for truancy."

"I got lost."

"Well, it's true that you may not know the area all that well, considering you just moved in," Mr Krones says. "Fine, I won't report you, but just this once, alright?" He stands and heads over to the door. "Just...when you introduce yourself, just don't say anything unnecessary."

Clay nods. A shame for the school, for accepting a criminal like himself. Mr Krones leads him up to his class. The moment he enters, the class quietens down instantaneously. Having all eyes on him is expected, but it doesn't make it any less unnerving.

"Please introduce yourself."

For a moment, Clay can almost see a shadow of that kingly self in Mr Krones, a hidden persona behind that seemingly-kind smile and those seemingly-sincere eyes. He can almost imagine that crown atop his head, the way he shouted "Kill them!" ringing in his mind. Clay blinks, snapping out of his trance. "Clay. Just...Clay."

"So, Clay, there seems to be a free seat over there," Mr Krones says, indicating a seat beside the window behind a boy in a black-and-red hoodie.

The boy says nothing as Clay sits down. There are already murmurs amongst the students, doing nothing to conceal the rumours whispered around. Clay ignores them,

"Those sitting beside him, please share your textbooks with him for today," Mr Krones says.

"Now, let us begin. Open your textbooks to page fifty-six..."

The girl beside Clay begrudgingly moves a little closer to place the book between their tables, though Clay thinks she shouldn't be bothered if she's just going to shoot him wary looks. Still, he's civil enough to pretend to read the text.

When class ends and it's time to head to his next class, Clay bumps into Nick in the corridor. Nick's expression is dark, eyes narrowed. Clay can imagine. He just hopes that Nick's mother wasn't called.

"Hey, meet me at the rooftop after school."

Nick doesn't give him a chance to respond when Nick hurries away, down the corridor. Clay watches him breeze past the crowd, before pulling his hoodie over his head and ambling down the stairs.

Recollection

Chapter Summary

Clay recalls what made him move to the city, and Nick is skeptical.

Chapter Notes

It's going to get a little dark soon. Will put trigger warnings

?? - ?? - EVENING

It was dark, the only illumination the beams of light from the streetlamps hanging over the pavement. Clay was on his way home, taking a short cut that involved passing by a noisy pub.

Clay partly cursed his decision, to take this route, because if he didn't, he wouldn't have been tangled up in this mess; he wouldn't have obtained that black stain on his record. The stain of "criminal".

He was the definition of an innocent youth, desperate to head home to his video games and comic books after spending the afternoon in detention (his parents weren't happy about that, and Clay wasn't exactly a model student). However, when he saw that woman in trouble, that man gripping her wrist tightly, forcing her back against the car's bonnet, the woman struggling to get away, he had to step in.

He ran up to the duo, phone out, threatening to call the police. Taken by surprise, the man tripped over his own two feet and fell on his rear, releasing his grip on the woman. She rushed over to Clay and hides behind him, trembling like a leaf. She smelled strongly of alcohol, as did the man. Clay's fingers were poised over the Call button, 991 already typed in.

"You damn brat! I'll sue!" the man slurred, picking himself up and swaying. "You wanna call the police? Go ahead and call them then!"

Clay paused. What is that supposed to mean?

"And you," the man said, pointing at the woman, who whimpered. "You'd better testify that he pushed me. Or else..."

The man did call for the police, and Clay didn't bother leaving. He could only stand there, shell-shocked, as the woman stabbed a finger at him and accused him of causing bodily harm to the man. He could hardly believe his ears when the police led him away, saluting the man who filed a charge against him.

It was the worst day of Clay's life.

A sharp pain slices through Clay's forehead and he grunts, a piece of white chalk bouncing to the ground. God, that hurt. He looks up, only to find his History teacher standing there, hands on his

hips, with the rest of the class casting him weird looks. Even the boy sharing his textbook with him looks like he'd rather be anywhere but here.

"Read pages forty-three to forty-four," the teacher says, and that is that.

Clay sighs, stands, and proceeds to read.

*

4/13 - MONDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

The sign says "Off-Limits", but the door is ajar. Clay hesitates for less than a second, then pulls the door open, revealing Nick sitting all by his lonesome on a broken desk, an opened pack of chips in his hand.

"Hey." Clay walks over and settles down on a chair which creaks beneath his weight. Nick offers him a chip, and Clay takes it.

"We didn't imagine all that, right?" Nick says, crumpling the empty bag on chips in his hand.

Nick doesn't even have to elaborate. Clay looks up at the sky, at a bird just minding its own business weaving through the clouds. The whole incident feels like such a long time ago. Like it didn't just happen this morning.

"We didn't," Clay says.

"Right." Nick stands, rocking on the desk. "But when we came back to the school, when we took the same route back, we're...here." He spreads his arms wide. "We're here with nothing to show for what we went through."

Clay remains silent. The entire thing is just too absurd, as if it all happened in a dream, but Clay isn't having it. Not when he can still sense his other self, Arsene, in the recesses of his soul. Daring him to forget when he had just unleashed his so-called "rebellious spirit".

Though thou be chained to Hell itself!

"Hey. Hello? Oi, are you listening to me?"

Clay blinks. "Yes. I'm listening, of course."

Nick shoots him a look. "Well, I didn't get booked or anything, and they're not gonna inform my mum since it's a first-time offense."

"That's great."

"So, do you wanna go back to the castle?" Nick asks. "Or at least, try to go back? Maybe we'll meet Floris again."

Clay plucks at lint from his jacket. He's sure Floris had been real, that the castle had been real, but the inconsistencies... "Yeah, let's do that."

"Great," Nick says, headed for the door. "Let's go."

*

4/13 - MONDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"It's still the school!"

Nick squats right outside the Enderlands High school gates with Clay leaning on the wall behind him. No matter how they retrace their steps, they end up back at school, the actual Enderlands High, and not that creepy castle in its place.

"Maybe we're doing something wrong," Clay says, pulling his phone out of his pocket. It's almost four. They've been wandering about for nearly an hour. His face falls when he realises that that creepy app is back. The one with the eye. The one he kept uninstalling but it still came back nonetheless.

"Wait," Nick says, making a grab at Clay's phone. Clay holds it out of reach, scowling. "Didn't you have your phone out when we were walking to school and ended up at the castle?"

Perhaps Nick may be on to something. Clay taps on the app with the eye, opening up to an online map similar to that of Google Maps, with a red icon indicating their current location.

However, the words on the bookmark bar beneath the map catches his attention.

Name: Peter Krones. Location: Enderlands High School. Distortion: Castle.

Upon tapping the bookmarked location, Clay is assaulted with a clouded mind and an unsteady balance reminiscent of vertigo. When his head clears, he finds himself standing right in front of the school gates, looking up at the barbican, at the gatehouse, the lowered drawbridge. He touches his face, laying his fingers on the same mask he donned when he awakened to Arsene. The lightweight sleeve of his green coat tumbles down his arm when he holds it up.

"That's-" Nick starts, cut off by a familiar voice.

"What are *you* guys doing here?"

Clay and Nick turn their heads towards the sound, towards a Floris dashing over to them both shocked and exasperated.

"Well, we just...uh..."

"We have questions," Clay says, straight to the point. "What is this place? Why is it a castle and not a school?"

Floris looks somewhat interested at this turn of events, sizing both Clay and Nick up. "You've noticed, huh? I thought you'd brush it off as some kind of hallucination."

"Trust me, I was tempted," Nick says. "But really, what *is* this place?"

"It's called the Metaverse," Floris says. "It's a place born from people's cognition."

Nick stares at him. Clay hums. Floris frowns, but carries on. "You see your school as a castle now because someone thinks of it as a castle. Someone with terribly twisted desires."

"Twisted desires?" Nick asks.

"Yeah," Floris says. "This castle is born from the twisted desires of that person, and that person becomes a Palace Ruler, ruling over this castle."

"So this castle is a Palace?" Clay asks.

"Ooh, you catch on quick." Floris nods approvingly. "This place being the Metaverse means that you can also use Personas if you've got the willpower."

That same power that Clay and Floris used - the summoning of strange creatures that can hurt the Shadows in the Palace. Arsene and Zorro.

"Then why does he change clothes?" Nick asks, gesturing to Clay's outfit. "Why don't *I* change clothes?"

"Because he's awakened to his Persona, and that's what he thinks a rebel looks like," Floris explains. "Anyway, I think I have some use for you."

"Use for us?"

"Yeah, you see, I..." Floris looks uncomfortable. "I'm doing an investigation into this Palace and its Ruler. I was kinda hoping you'd help me out, with your power and all."

"You're...not talking to *me*, right?" Nick says, glancing at Clay.

"Think of it as paying me back for saving you guys," Floris says. "So, what'll it be?"

"Well, our curfew's at seven, so we've got plenty of time," Nick says. "What say you?"

"Sure." It's not like he's got anything to do right now. Might as well kill some time. Floris' tail swishes in delight.

"Great! Let's get going. I'll teach you stuff along the way." Before Clay or Nick can even answer, Floris is already running off towards the same vent that they escaped out through the last time.

Clay takes the lead, with Nick right behind him.

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Sapnap

Chapter Summary

The second awakening

Chapter Notes

Mentions of advancement made on minors close to the end of the chap\

Wow its a longer chap than i expected uni is tiringggg

4/13 - MONDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"Can I..." Nick holds up a hand. "Can I ask something?"

Floris doesn't even spare him a glance as he peeks out from behind the door. "What?"

"Who were those...people in the jail cells?" Nick asks. "I *know* those people. At least, I think so."

"They're cognitive beings," Floris says. "You know how this place is born of twisted desires?" He exits the room and presses his back flush against the bookshelf, out of sight of any incoming Shadows. Clay does the same on the opposite side of the hallway with Nick crouching.

"Yeah."

"Well, those cognitive beings exist in real life, but they're not the same people as those in your world," Floris says, darting to the end of the hallway and opening a door, silently ambushing the lone Shadow inside. The Shadow bursts into ash without nary a sound. "How they exist in the Metaverse is totally dependent on how the Palace ruler thinks of them."

"Wait, so those people getting tortured..."

"The Palace Ruler thinks that they're his slaves," Clay finishes.

"Can we...can we go down to the dungeons again?" Nick says, as Floris attempts to worm his way into an air vent, only to wriggle back out and shoot Nick a look.

"Why would we do that?"

"Because..." Nick bites his lip.

There is a moment of silence, then Floris sighs. "Fine. But just for a little while. Follow me." He squeezes back through the air vent, with the other two right on his tail.

The air vent trip seems to last forever, but at least this time the journey is smoother than the last. For some reason, the number of guards has diminished considerably, with only a couple patrolling

the dark, dank walkways. Water drips from the ceiling above. Moss tickles their backs as they hide from the guards, Nick almost tipping a beer keg in the process.

With one cleave from Arsene's claw, the Shadow burst into ash, and they carry on.

"You're pretty good at this, for a beginner," Floris says, standing at the entrance of another room with a distorted door. The room is devoid of Shadows, which is a good thing. Once again, Clay can see the various distortions in space, where the room seems to resemble a classroom rather than the drawing room it appears to be.

"This is a safe room," Floris answers as if reading Clay's thoughts. "This place is freer from the Palace Ruler's cognition and their power. No Shadows will appear here so we can be rest assured that we are safe here."

So it's a rest stop of sorts. In any case, Clay still has no idea what Floris wants to accomplish here. Sure, this castle is big. Does he intend to explore every inch of it? If so, then what?

"What's your investigation about?" Nick asks. "It's not really...normal to see a fox running about in a castle. Much less a fox on two legs."

Floris glares at him. "I'm not a fox! I'm a human!"

"You look like a fox to me," Clay says. "With the tail and the ears and all."

"I was just...turned into a fox. That's right," Floris says triumphantly. "I'm a human that turned into a fox, and I'm trying to turn myself back."

"So you think that something in this castle can turn you back?" Clay asks.

"Yeah," Floris says, nodding. "Well, that's not all though. I'm here to find this Palace Ruler's Treasure."

"Treasure?" Nick asks, eyes lighting up. "Like, those kinds of pirates?"

"That sounds so roguish and *so* uncivilised," Floris says, cackling. "I was thinking more like a phantom thief."

Clay smirks. That sounds cool on so many levels. Like a daredevil leaping off rooftops, slinking around hallways, catching foes off guard and stealing that diamond when they least expect it. Wouldn't it be rather amazing if *he* was that phantom thief?

"So, this Treasure...do you know what it is?" Clay asks.

Floris swishes his tail, paws folded.

"Then how are you supposed to find it?"

"That's why I'm doing an investigation," Floris says. "I can sense the Treasure but it's faint, so it must be in a room way further than here. Anyway, you want to see those cognitive beings, right? Let's go."

The cells are only slightly further past the safe room, the trio passing by the cave-in that Clay caused the last time they were here. An unholy shriek echoes from deeper in the dungeon. Clay flinches ever so slightly. Nick runs forward, stopping outside a cell with a boy inside, his face bruised, gashes on his arms and legs. He refuses to meet their eyes, murmuring something

unintelligible. The next cell contains someone similar, and the cell after that, except that it's a girl.

"What the hell..." Nick slams a fist against the stony wall. "This is so messed up! Is this how the Ruler sees them?"

"You know them?"

"Yeah," Nick says. "They're part of the volleyball team, which Mr Krones is the teacher in charge of. *And* he's the coach."

Mr Krones? That lanky teacher with the glasses? Playing volleyball? Perhaps Clay shouldn't judge a book by its cover. Still, the king was clearly Mr Krones - after repeated encounters with that man, Clay is certain. If this is how he sees the team he is managing...

"This is physical abuse," Clay says.

"Yeah, it is," Floris says. "So this Mr Krones is a teacher in your school who sees it as a castle and abuses his students."

Nick nods. "And he sucks up to the principal and everything so he never gets in trouble."

"Alright, so you've seen what you wanted," Floris says. "Let's go. Further into the castle." He hops on the spot, eager to get back to his so-called investigation, when Clay stops him.

"Wait," Clay says, phone in his hand. "It's half-past six."

"What's happening at half-past six?"

"Curfew," Nick says, sighing. "We have to leave now or my mum's gonna kill us."

"Oh," Floris says, disappointed. "Let's head back to the entrance then."

They take the same route back to the entrance hall, squirming through the vent and emerging at the corridor opposite the room with their infiltration point, the air vent they used to escape in the first place. Following Floris' lead, they dash into the entrance hall, footsteps drowned by the carpet...

A spear whizzes through the air out of nowhere and stabs Clay's coat - but did not tear through flesh, luckily - and the force is enough to pin him to the ground as the tip of the spear stabs itself into the carpet. Clay is knocked clean off his feet. He grabs his mask, about to summon Arsene, only to stop when a Shadow grabs his neck and shoves a blade right under his chin.

Clay glances around. Crap, they're surrounded. What must be several legions of guards swarm them; standing at the far end of the room right beneath that portrait of Mr Krones, is none other than Mr Krones himself. He approaches them, hands on his hips, glasses catching the glint of the chandelier light.

"You rats are back again," Mr Krones says. If this is the cognitive world, then doesn't that mean that this Mr Krones is not the actual Mr Krones? "You've caused me so much trouble."

Beside him, Floris is also captured, tiny fox legs kicking and struggling against the much-larger Shadow. Nick is also captured, a sword to his throat, hands grasping feebly at the guard Shadow's arm guard. With so many Shadows surrounding them, there's absolutely no way they can win. Clay wants to laugh as his chest constricts, heart beating at an unimaginable speed.

Is this where it ends?

"I thought I recognised you," Mr Krones says, turning to Nick. "You're the one whose brother died."

At this, Nick's usually calm disposition changes, morphs into something ferocious. Eyes bulging, teeth gnashed. "You shut up."

"Is that how you speak to your teacher?" Mr Krones shakes his head in mock disdain. "Well, no matter. You're about to join him anyway. Your useless piece-of-shit brother and-"

"I said SHUT UP!" Nick bellows. "You know nothing! You know nothing about him!"

"Your brother was always very kind. Very...*admirable*, but he was weak," Mr Krones says. "He was the one who broke your family apart, wasn't he?"

Clay stares at Nick.

"Your dad left, your mum threw herself into her work!"

"KEEP YOUR FUCKING MOUTH SHUT!"

A flash of blue flames erupts from Nick's body, blinding everyone in the entrance hall. An expression of fear crosses Mr Krones' face. Something pulses behind Nick, a faint silhouette of a pirate with a cannon for an arm.

"W-What is this-" Mr Krones takes a tentative step back.

"Don't talk about my family like that," Nick says. The carpet burns beneath his feet as the pirate becomes clearer and clearer. "You don't have the fucking right to talk about them like that!"

You made me wait quite a while.

Something seizes Nick. A hand flies up to his head, fingers grasping at his temple.

You seek power, correct? Then let us form a pact.

Nick's breathing is ragged, chest heaving, head sandwiched between both hands now.

Why not hoist the flag and wreak havoc? The other "you" who exists within desires it thus. I am thou, thou art I.

A mask appears on Nick's face, reminiscent of a panda's colours on a skull, circles of black dotting the mask. His clothes disperse into blue and white butterflies, a completely new outfit moulding onto his body. A white bandana wraps around his forehead, a white combat jacket hugging his torso, black arm sleeves appearing on his arms. A symbol depicting a flame blinks into existence onto his chest, which honestly looks absolutely badass on top of the rest of his outfit. Clay wonders if he looked like that when he first summoned Arsene. The sheer desperation, the boiling fury dictating your every move. Nick reaches up, fingers curled around his mask, and pulls. With a scream, Nick rips the mask from his face, blood splattering to the ground. Thunder roars outside, and his Persona's form is now clear.

A pirate stands at double Nick's height with a skull for a head. it roars, clouds of smoke fired from its cannon. Electricity sparks, bolts zigzagging through the air and zapping several Shadows till they're nothing but ash.

"What're you waiting for?!" Nick shouts, running over and pulling the spear out Clay's coat and the

ground. "Let's get the hell outta here!"

Without missing a beat, Clay summons Arsene, forcing the other Shadows back with spheres of black. Floris keeps the other Shadows at bay with his wind attacks as well, blowing them away when they try to get near.

"What are you doing?! Get after them!" Mr Krones is seething, stabbing a finger at the retreating trio. Floris leads the way, throwing open the door leading to the room with the air vent and dispatching the Shadow inside. Clay kicks the door closed and Floris wiggles through the vent, crawling as fast as his paws allow him to, followed by the duo. They manage to evade the guard Shadows.

"Where did they go?"

"They musn't be far! Find them!"

At least they manage to fool the guards for now. Floris tumbles out first, rolling away safely, while Clay and Nick land in a heap of tangled limbs.

"Well, the security level's too high for now," Floris says. "We're going to have to come back another day."

"Another day?" Nick asks, surprised.

Floris raises a brow. Or, at least, he *looks* like he's raising a brow. "Yeah, you promised that you were gonna help me, right?"

Clay shifts from one foot to the other, suddenly uncomfortable when Nick stares at him pleadingly.

"I didn't promise to help you tomorrow," Clay says.

"What!" Floris looks offended, hackles raising. "Wait a second! *I helped you escape and get to the dungeons!* You guys would have been dead without me!"

"So would you. I think the debt is repaid," Clay says, shrugging. "Maybe I'll cross over if I feel like it. Bye now."

"H-Hey, wa-!" Floris' voice gets cut off as Clay activates the app on his phone, and they blink out of the Metaverse and back into their own world.

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4/13 - MONDAY - EVENING

"That was crazy," Nick says, flopping down on his bed with a thump.

Clay hums, borrowing Nick's study table to do his math homework. Who the hell gives homework on the first day of school? Clay kicks his legs up on the table, pen in his mouth. In any case, they managed to return to the house five minutes to seven. Not like Mrs Armstrong was in the living room to greet them anyway.

"I mean, what's up with that fox?" Nick rolls onto his stomach, head resting on his hands as he props his elbows up on the bed. "And that castle?" He sighs. "I need some time to wrap my head around all this."

"I feel kinda bad." Guilt really does takes a while to manifest. "Should we have helped him?"

"I dunno. We have lives too," Nick says. "What really concerns me are those people trapped down there in the dungeon."

The moping, screaming people, all manner of injuries on every patch of exposed skin. Clay opens his eyes, staring out at the dark neighbourhood to clear his mind of those images. "You said you knew them."

"Yeah," Nick says. "I do know some of them. Or at least, I do know people who know them."

Clay swivels around in the rolling chair. "You do?"

"Yeah. I think one of them's in your class. Darryl...I think," Nick says, picking at lint on the bed sheets. His eyes light up. "Right, tomorrow's the volleyball rally."

"The what?" Clay did not hear about this. No one's even mentioned it to him.

"The volleyball rally. It's Krones' idea," Nick mutters. "He just wants to show off how cool he is. All because he's the one who supposedly built the volleyball team from the ground up."

It looks like Clay needs more information on this Krones. If he is going to be his homeroom teacher...

"About Krones," Clay says, math homework forgotten, leaning forward in his chair. "Tell me whatever you know."

Nick gazes at the ground. "He's a shitty guy, but he's good at hiding it." Clay recalls his own experience: how Mr Krones had treated him, just like how a kind homeroom teacher should, but he still cannot forget that uneasiness from just being around him. "I heard rumours that he's some kind of relationship with Darryl though. He was the guy in his car this morning."

"Relationship? Isn't this Darryl guy a student?"

"Yeah. Messed up, right?" Nick says. "Apparently he goes for anyone good-looking, doesn't matter whether they're a guy or a girl. I mean, it's true he brought the volleyball team victory but..." He slams a fist onto the mattress. "That's why the school just doesn't...they don't care about what he does as long as he can improve the school's image."

Fucked up is the only term for this. Clay takes a deep breath, forcing the breath out through his nostrils, and turns back to the desk. The work of the shitty adults, who care more about what society sees them than the well-being of their students.

"What about you?" Clay asks, eyes on the question stem but unable to process anything. "What's gotten you so worked up?"

"Oh." Nick chuckles. "It's a long story, really. Are you sure you wanna hear it? It's kinda depressing."

"If you're willing to tell me."

Nick smiles. "I dunno, man. I just feel like I can tell you anything. You've just got that" -he holds out a hand, waving it around aimlessly -"that weird aura around you."

Clay turns such that he's sitting with the back rest pressed up against his chest. "Whenever you're ready."

A Lack of Evidence

Chapter Summary

BBH appears :)

Chapter Notes

Mentions of physical abuse from teacher to student.

Will be including soundtracks (hyperlinked) at the start of each scene or in the middle.
If soundtrack doesn't change will not have new hyperlink. Not a must to listen to it!
Most soundtracks are either from persona 4 or 5

Also recommended to use PC to listen to it cos I tk it'll be difficult on the phone...

[4/13 - MONDAY - EVENING](#)

"It's just...my brother died when he was in his first year in high school," Nick says. "He was just a year younger than me, so it makes that fairly recent. The thing is, he was nice to everyone, no matter how shitty they were to him. People don't usually fistfight in Enderlands, so it's strange that he came back with bruises and everything, like the injuries we saw in those slaves back at the castle."

"He was on the volleyball team?"

"Yeah." Nick's expression darkens. "I think you can see where this is going. Basically, he was so tired from all the intense training and keeping up with schoolwork that he just...he wasn't paying attention and..." Nick chews on his lip. "A car hit him."

A weight sinks to the pit of Clay's stomach.

"He died on the spot, apparently," Nick says, eyes shining. "And it was all Krones' fault. And now he has the *audacity* to bring it up in front of me, blaming *my* family when *he* was the one who-"

"Do you...do you need a hug?"

Nick lets out a watery laugh. "Thanks, but it's fine. I don't think Neil would want me sobbing over his death." He glances over at the clock. "I think it's time to go to sleep. We have the stupid rally tomorrow."

Right, the volleyball rally.

"Nights," Nick says, turning around, back to Clay. Clay returns to his work. He should finish up the last few problems before bed, at least. Wouldn't want to get sent to juvenile hall because of his unfinished assignments.

4/14 - TUESDAY - AFTERNOON

A volleyball slams into the ground with a resounding thud in the other court. The stadium bursts into applause and cheers. For Krones, of all people. The girl beside Clay swoons. Clay nearly gags.

The next ball is served. It is set high into the air, and Krones is the one to smack it down towards the ground.

Or at least, it was probably meant to be spiked towards the ground. Perhaps it was a twist of fate, or perhaps it was intentional, but the ball goes flying into the face of a dark-skinned boy. The boy's surprised yelp is cut off and he falls to the ground in a mess of splayed limbs. Clay glances over at Krones. What is he going to do now? Clay was hoping to catch a glimpse of the true man behind the mask of niceties, brows furrowed when he watches Krones hesitate, then proceed to run over to the boy.

"Someone get the nurse!" he shouts.

Several people are already pulling out their phones. The person sitting on his other side whimpers. Clay's eyes slide over to him. A boy with dirty-blond hair, a red-and-black hoodie thrown over his head, shrinks into himself. He's the same boy who was sitting in Krones' car they saw yesterday. It felt like such a long time ago.

Clay makes no move to speak to him, silently trying to recall his name, and turns back to the rally. It was Darryl, right? He registers a hand on his shoulder from behind him, and he looks up. Nick looms over him, jabbing his chin at the exit. The teachers didn't set any restrictions as to where they can go, so it's not like Clay's breaking any rules. Silently, he stands and follows Nick out the door.

The hallway is a relief from the obnoxious cheers of Krones' fans piercing his ears. There are quite a few students milling about in the hallways as well, a group of girls standing around and gossiping, while a few boys are checking out the bulletin board. There are some students hanging about or studying in the classrooms as well.

"I remember the faces of the people we saw yesterday," Nick says. "Hamish Goodsworth, Peniel Addams, Gina Lawrence and Cheng Yao Yi."

Clay cocks a brow. "And?"

"We've seen how shitty Krones was, right?" Nick says. "You saw that castle and everything. He sees himself as a king and the students as slaves. I've decided; we should collect evidence and report him to the police."

Clay hums, figuring that the nearby water dispenser is the most interesting thing in the world.

"You'd help me out, right?" Nick says. "Come on, man, we can't let this slide."

Honestly, Clay wants to cause as little trouble as possible, but what Nick says makes some sort of sense too, and the fact that Krones did that to Nick's brother...even if Clay has no beef with the guy as of yet, seeing Nick so visibly distraught at what he did - and the sheer monstrosity of it all - fuels his drive.

"Right. What do you want me to do?" Clay asks.

"For starters, we can look for the people I mentioned. They're the people on the volleyball team that I sort of recognise. Maybe if we can get them to 'fess up about Kronos' abuse, then we should have something solid."

"Sounds good."

"Okay, the thing is, we're probably gonna want to do this while the rally's still ongoing," Nick says. "And that's for another..." He glances at his phone. "Twenty minutes. Wanna split up?"

Nick informs Clay of the people - Hamish and Yao Yi, who are in the same class as himself - and proceeds to run down to the level with the seniors' classrooms. Clay returns to his own homeroom to find Hamish doing his homework, his arm bandaged and several plasters all over his legs. He looks up when Clay enters, but dips his head again, pretending not to have noticed his presence.

Clay leans against the desk beside Hamish's, not missing the way Hamish subtly turns his body. There is a giant bruise on the back of his neck, at the base. How did that even get there?

"You're Goodsworth, right?" Clay says. Hamish flinches, but peers up at him with beady eyes.

"Y-Yes..."

"Where'd you get those injuries?" Clay asks, gesturing to his arm.

"H-Huh?" Hamish is absolutely caught off guard. He fidgets with his pen. "I...I got them during practice. It's nothing serious, though. It's just...Why do you care so much?"

Clay gives him an unimpressed look. "You sure Mr Kronos isn't abusing you?"

"Abusing me?" Hamish shakes his head, a fierce expression on his face, a far cry from his meekness a second ago. "He's a good coach! He knows how to push us to our limits and...and...it's because of him that we managed to get the gold medal this championship!"

So that's how he brainwashed them, hmm? In the name of intensive training? Unacceptable. It doesn't seem like Hamish is willing to open up about the abuse. Slight bruises on his wrists may be explained away with inadequate technique, but definitely not that gigantic bruise on his neck. Clay isn't going to threaten him - he'd get reported and thrown into jail, which is the last thing he wants. Besides, he isn't going to stoop to Kronos' level.

"If there's nothing else, leave me alone," Hamish hisses, and pointedly turns back to his work. Clay sighs and leaves the classroom.

Yao Yi is another girl from his class, and Clay shares math, chemistry and biology with her, but in this mess of a hallway, Clay isn't sure where he'd find her. He remembers Yao Yi as an unassuming, Chinese girl. Green-rimmed spectacles and clashing outfit colours. He wanders about for a bit, hoping that Yao Yi isn't still in the gym.

His phone buzzes. A new message from Nick. Clay leans against the wall to view the message.

Nick: Hey. You find out anything?

Me: Haven't talked to Cheng yet.

Nick: I found both of them but neither of them are willing to talk. You wanna go look for her together?

Me: Sure. I'm on the second floor.

Nick climbs the stairs, meeting up with Clay where they first split.

"Both of them are keeping quiet," Nick says, a hand on his hip, the other slipping his phone into his pocket. "They're all dead set on denying it, but it's plain obvious that they've got injuries that aren't normal."

"Goodsworth said it's from training, but he has a bruise on here," Clay says, a hand on the back of his neck to demonstrate. Nick's eyes go wide.

"Krones could have broken his fucking neck."

Clay shuffles his feet.

"Yao Yi is our last hope," Nick says. "If people I know don't want to tell me anything, then I don't think the other volleyball members will talk to us."

Clay agrees, turning around to head down the corridor when he bumps into someone, a short-haired bespectacled girl, clutching her laptop bag to her chest. She mumbles a flustered "Sorry!" She is about to rush off when Clay recognises her immediately and grabs her shoulder. She winces, almost dropping her bag, and whirls around, slight fear in her eyes. Clay lets her go, stuffing his hands into his pockets.

"Sorry about that. I didn't mean to-"

"I-It's alright. It's just...my shoulder hurts a little and..."

"Your shoulder hurts?" Nick asks. "Yao Yi, who hurt you?"

"Huh?" Yao Yi shakes her head. "I hurt myself during practice. No one hurt me."

"Are you serious?" Nick says. "Not even Mr Krones?"

She averts her gaze at the sound of his name, her fingers playing with a fraying thread of her laptop bag. Bingo.

"You can tell us," Nick says. "We promise you won't get in trouble."

Yao Yi still refuses to look at them, shrinking back against the wall like a cornered rat. Clay takes a step back.

"I can't," Yao Yi says. "I just...please leave me alone." She pushes past them, surprisingly strong for her petite stature, and hurries down the stairs.

[So](#), we're back to the drawing board," Clay drawls. Nick runs a hand through his hair.

The bell overhead rings, and the voice over the speakers informs everyone that they can pack up and head home.

"Let's go home today," Clay says, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "We can think about what to do in the evening."

Nick nods, a small smile returning to his face. "Yeah. I wanna get out of here anyway."

Clay adjusts his bag thrown over his shoulder.

"So, you wanna get some burgers?"

Nick laughs, slapping a hand on Clay's back. "Nah, was thinking of checking out this new diner that just opened."

They leave the school compound, totally oblivious to the fox concealed behind a bush in the garden, listening intently to a conversation between a boy in a red hoodie and Krones himself.

Dilemma

Chapter Summary

Fundy is pissed and BBH faces a dilemma

Chapter Notes

They need a new game plan

4/15 - WEDNESDAY - MORNING

"That's him."

"Krones' fuck boy."

Clay raises a brow at the rumours. Oh no, they're not about him. They're about the timid boy in the black-and-red hoodie clutching a worn-out file to his chest, with his bag hanging open. Clay would have believed them had Nick not told him about this boy, this Darryl Noveschosch, a victim of Krones himself. Clay needs to talk to him sometime...that's not between classes.

Nick had suggested last night to talk to someone who isn't in the team to open up about Krones' abuse, since the team seems to be sworn to secrecy. The only other person who seems to be intimately involved with Krones happens to be Darryl. Even so, the boy is elusive, hiding his face and running out of the classroom when the moment the bell rings. Pinning him down is like trying to find a ghost.

Clay enters his homeroom and settles down at his seat, ignoring the whispers that start up the second he does. The people who talk the most are the people who don't understand.

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4/15 - WEDNESDAY - LUNCHTIME

"Are you serious?" Nick mutters, plopping down onto a bench. They are at a rather secluded alcove stemming from the hallway passing through the garden, a rest stop for students to chat. Clay inserts a coin into a vending machine and out drops a Diet Coke. "Hey, get me a Mountain Dew." Clay tosses him the can as he chugs his own.

"How does he just...keep evading us?" Nick sighs. "We've been everywhere. Even the library!"

"I think that someone like him *would* be in the library," Clay says, shrugging, disposing his Coke can into the trash bin with a clunk.

"Yeah, but we searched even there."

Clay opens his mouth to speak when suddenly, an orange-furred creature leaps up onto the stone

table, startling the both of them. Nick throws himself back against the bench so hard his head hits the wall, and even Clay has plastered himself to the vending machine.

"What the heck? When did a fox-"

"I finally found you, you piece of shits!" the fox hisses, tail straight up in the air. Clay doesn't know what that means in fox-speak, but Floris looks genuinely pissed. "How *dare* you abandon me-"

"How did *you* get out of there?" Nick cries. "And why do you look...different?"

"For starters, I can pass through from the Metaverse to your world whenever I want," Floris snaps. "This is just how I look in *your* world."

"So you're actually a fox?"

"I'm *not*!" Floris bares his fangs. "I'm a human! Stop changing the subject! *You* guys abandoned me after promising to help me out!"

"Technically, we didn't *promise* you-"

"You said 'sure'!"

"Yeah, but-"

Clay grabs at Floris' head and stuffs him into his bag, ignoring the way the fox thrusts and wracks its body inside, screaming to be let out. He slaps the bag. "Quiet!"

Two teachers walk by, though Krones is neither of them, complaining about having to find a stray fox that somehow wandered into the school. They glance over at Nick and Clay (and Floris) but wordlessly moves on. Clay relaxes, and releases his grip on Floris for the fox to spring out of the bag and proceed to snap his jaws at him.

"What the actual f-"

"Okay, look. This isn't the safest place to talk," Nick says. "Why not we...um...*apologise* to you after school lets out?"

"Apology? I want my promise fulfilled!"

"Lunch is about to end," Clay says, standing and holding his bag open. Empty save for a pencil case and some worksheets. "You want in?"

Floris considers it seriously for a couple of seconds, then jumps in, curling into a tiny ball. The bag sinks under his weight, nearly knocking Clay off his feet. Nick gives him a look of severe pity.

Clay sighs.

*

[4/15 - WEDNESDAY - AFTERNOON](#)

"Adrian, Mr Krones is looking for you."

Clay looks up from his phone. Literature has just ended, and he's waiting for his next class when he overhears Yao Yi who has appeared in the doorway, talking to the same dark-skinned boy from

yesterday, the same boy who got his face slammed into by Krones' spike. He watches them out of the corner of his eye, ears perked up. Adrian goes pale, fingers clenched tightly around the strap of his bag.

"Mr Krones...?" Adrian mumbles. "Did he say what he wanted?"

Yao Yi shakes her head. Silently, Adrian heads out of the room, staring at the ground. She seems to have noticed Clay who averts his gaze a tad too late, and she hurries away.

Clay drops his gaze to his homework as the teacher walks in.

*

4/15 - WEDNESDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

Screw you, Nick.

Okay, it wasn't exactly Nick's fault; Nick's part-time job had suddenly called since one of his co-workers could not come in on this surprisingly-busy day. Clay finds himself heading home alone, having to change trains at Valentine Hills...is that Darryl?!

Clay squints, at the boy standing near a bread stand, currently on the phone, looking to be on the verge of tears. Clay moves nearer, careful to stay out of sight.

"I told you I don't want to!" Darryl cries, stifling a snuffle. "Please stop...I..." Darryl's eyes widen. "No. Don't do it! I-!" The other person must have disconnected the call, because Darryl stares down at the phone in his hand, an expression of disbelief on his face. He lets out a shaky breath and just so happens to turn in the direction that Clay is standing. He meets Clay's eyes, looking like a deer caught in the headlights, and begins to sprint.

Crap! Clay tightens his grip on his bag and begins dashing after him, jostling past people crowding around the entrance to the station mall. Floris yelps from inside as the bag thumps against Clay's back. He manages to chase Darryl into the underground mall, finally cornering him in front of a florist's, when he reaches a dead end.

Darryl turns around with the most fearful look in his eyes, reminding Clay of a scared animal, and for a moment, Clay feels like the villain here.

"W-What do you want?" Darryl whimpers. "Please don't hurt me! I don't have a lot of money on me-"

"I don't want your money," Clay says. He purses his lips. "That phone call. It was from Mr Krones, right?"

"Huh? I...I don't know what you're...talking about," Darryl looks so pathetic it almost hurts. Clay narrows his eyes, and Darryl presses his back flush against the wall.

"You were having an argument, weren't you?" Clay says. "He was forcing himself onto you."

Darryl hangs his head, staring at his sneakers. "How much of it did you hear?"

Clay's eyes dart around them. They're surrounded by many ears and eyes, especially by Enderlands students. He jabs a thumb at the underground mall. "Let's talk at McDonald's."

*

4/15 - WEDNESDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"He...he was...he wanted me to go to his house," Darryl says, sipping at his iced green tea as Clay nibbles on a fry. "And you know...you know what that means." Darryl's voice cracks, his lip wobbling, but not a single tear rolling down his cheek. "I didn't want to, but he said he'd take Adrian off the team, and that...I don't want..."

"Adrian's your friend, right?"

"Yeah," Darryl says. "He worked so hard just to get a starting position, and if I don't...I don't *sleep* with him...I, I mean...Mr Krones, then...Adrian'd lose his starting position and...and..." He laughs bitterly. "I'm sorry. I'm just unloading all of this onto you and-"

"It's fine," Clay says. *I was the one who chased you down anyway.* "Besides, you shouldn't have to sleep with him? Why not report this to the authorities?"

"The authorities..." Is that a flash of anger Clay saw? Darryl stirs his drink with the straw. "You mean the police that won't do anything?"

Clay doesn't answer.

"They don't care. Everyone knows what's happening. The sexual abuse, the physical abuse, everything. They just don't care," Darryl says. "The school's image would be tarnished if they did."

"It's always about image, hmm?"

"Yeah. It's terrible, I know," Darryl says. "Enderlands is a good prep school, but...well...every school has skeletons in its closet."

"But you shouldn't have to live in fear like that," Clay says, teeth gritted, trying his best to keep his voice level. Darryl raises a brow.

"You're interesting," Darryl says, and Clay can see the hint of a smile on his face. It's like a tiny victory that he can celebrate. "There's something weird about you I can just...that I can't place."

"I get that a lot."

"Not very modest now, are we?" Darryl grins, and proceeds to eat a fry. "You're different from what the rumours made you out to be. I heard you broke out of a jail cell using only a spoon before, and that you run the largest drug ring in your hometown, and that-"

"I..." Clay closes his ajar jaw. "I what again?"

"O-Oh, it's nothing," Darryl says. He gestures to the food. "Shall we finish this up?"

Eventually, he and Darryl go separate ways, but the weight of Darryl's dilemma crushes at his chest. Darryl seemed like such a sweet guy who can barely harm a fly. Perhaps that is why Krones targeted him - a boy too meek to fight back. On the train ride back to the Armstrong residence, Clay types a message to Nick, that he's found Darryl.

"Hey, hey, what are you typing? Lemme see!" Floris pokes his head out from Clay's bag, pawing his shoulder and hoisting his tiny body up to peer down at Clay's phone.

"To Nick," Clay says, promptly closing the messaging app and heading towards a pet store. Now...what do foxes eat?

What Darryl said is equally frightening and unnerving, about how the school knows about the abuse, but doesn't try to stop it. About how they're too powerless to change the system, that everyone is keeping quiet so as not to incur the wrath of the faculty. At this point...

What other option do they have?

Unforgivable

Chapter Summary

Nick and Clay have made a decision

Chapter Notes

WARNING: There will be a scene depicting attempted suicide AND mentions of rape AND racial slurs. Chapter summary explains what happens in the chapter.

If you are uncomfortable reading any of the above, please skip to the notes at the end of the chapter where I will summarise what happened.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

4/15 - WEDNESDAY - EVENING

"You followed us back home?" Nick cries the moment he closes the door. Clay doesn't know why he bothers. Mrs Armstrong almost never leaves her office anyway. Either that, or she's always at the Prosecutor's Office.

"Yeah! What was I meant to do?" Floris snarls. "Besides, you guys haven't apologised or fulfilled your promise or anything!" He chews on some dog food that Clay bought. He makes a face. "This sucks. Don't you have better food?"

"Hey, I spent a fortune on that," Clay calls from the bed as he scrolls through Instagram. "At this rate, I'm going to have to take up a part-time job."

Floris yips.

"So." Nick says, deflating into the rolling chair, "the police are a no-go, huh?"

"Yeah, from what Darryl's said," Clay says. "According to him, they don't care."

Nick presses his lips together.

"Regarding that," Floris says, "if you help me find the Treasure, you can get rid of this shitty teacher."

Clay raises a brow.

"What do you mean?" His arm flops onto the bed and he stares up at the ceiling.

"So you know how Palaces are formed from people's twisted desires?" Floris says. "So, the Treasure is the heart of the Palace, or rather, the one thing keeping the Palace alive."

"Huh?" Nick shoots him a confused look.

Floris sighs deeply. "Basically, the Treasure is the root of the Palace. Steal the Treasure, and the Palace disappears. Since the Palaces are a physical manifestation of a person's twisted desires..."

"If we steal Krones' Treasure, his twisted desires will disappear too," Clay says, eyes lighting up.

"Hey, I think it'll work!" Nick cries, clapping his hands. "I mean, it's a win-win situation for us! Other people don't know about that world, right? So we won't leave any tracks of our involvement, but we still get a new Krones!"

"That's not wrong, but not quite right either," Floris says. "While the Palace *is* someone's twisted desires given form, taking away their Treasure and causing the Palace to collapse will make them lose *all* their desires. Their desire to eat, their desire to go about their day..." Floris' face darkens. "Even their desire to live."

A chill runs down Clay's spine. Does that mean if they follow through on this plan, Krones may...they may actually... He glances at Nick, who seems to be thinking the exact same thing. Are they willing to bear such a burden? At its core, it's fundamentally murder, right?

"I mean, like what Nick's said, we're not going to leave any traces of ourselves. No one would ever catch us," Floris says. "What say you? Are you in?"

Clay bites his lip. "Let me...Let us think about it."

"Yeah. I mean, Krones is super shitty, but I don't think he deserves to die," Nick says.

Floris raises his hackles. "Come on, I thought you had stronger spirits than that!"

Clay closes his eyes. No matter what Floris says to try to convince them, there's still the possibility that *they* may be the people responsible for Krones' death. The *death* of a person. Not even Clay, who seems to harbour enough rebellious spirit to summon his own Persona, wants to take on that huge responsibility, that huge burden of guilt.

"Fine," Floris says, and deftly climbs the tiny stairs that lead up to Clay's bunk. He settles beside Clay, who frowns. "What?"

Clay turns his back to him. "Nothing."

Clay falls asleep first, his conversation with Darryl replaying in his head like a movie without a stop button, lulled to slumber in the quiet of Nick's room by the scratching of pencil on paper.

*

[4/16 - THURSDAY - MORNING](#)

Clay had been, quite frankly, daydreaming when a sudden movement in his periphery catches his attention. Vision focusing, Clay can only watch, stock still, as the silhouette of a person stands atop the roof of a building just right by the classroom block. Someone else must have caught sight of it too, because she screams.

"H-He's gonna jump!"

That's looks exactly like what's happening. More and more students have turned their heads to stare at the view of the boy, head angled down, as if contemplating something profound.

That is, before he steps off the ledge, plunging to the ground below, eliciting even more screams

from around him. Clay's phone buzzes incessantly, but all he can think about is the boy just...falling.

Falling.

Tumbling through the air. With no more cares to give to the world.

His fingers can't stop shaking, not even as he picks his phone up to check the messages. Upon reading them, he pushes past a bunch of onlookers with their cameras out (sickos, the lot of them) and sidesteps a fainted girl, ignoring the teacher as she attempts to get the uproar under control. He barrels out into the hallway, meeting eyes with Nick, who appears to have managed to tear away from his classroom.

"Courtyard," Nick says lowly. "Now."

Clay's bag rustles and Floris pokes his head out from within. "That boy, he..."

Another boy - Darryl, as Clay recognises - runs out from the classroom, headed towards the courtyard as well, footsteps thundering along the wooden floor.

"Now's not the time," Nick says, turning to Clay and Floris, a simmering anger in his voice. "Let's go."

Clay doesn't need telling twice.

*

[4/16 - THURSDAY - MORNING](#)

There is already a sizable crowd gathered at the courtyard, made up of busybodies trying to take videos, or those who just simply want to get in on the action. Clay and Nick jostle their way through the crowd, to find that the paramedics have already arrived and are currently in the process of carrying the boy onto a stretcher. That face...Clay knows him. Adrian, the friend of Darryl's. No wonder Darryl seemed so shaken.

Speaking of whom, Darryl is knelt by Adrian's side. Adrian's lips part and move, whispering something to Darryl, who seizes up, the first few tears rolling down his cheeks. When asked who'd accompany Adrian to the doctor's, Darryl immediately volunteers himself and follows the paramedics to the ambulance, staying right by Adrian's side the whole time.

Clay bites the inside of his cheek. It was Krones. It had to be. Someone moves beside him, squeezing through the throngs of people, beating a hasty escape towards the Recreational Building. Nick noticed it too. He grabs Clay's wrist, and they chase after her.

"Yao Yi!"

Clay catches up to her first, slamming a hand onto the wall right in her path. Yao Yi stops abruptly, her neck mere inches from his arm.

"Why'd you run like that?" Nick demands. "You know something, don't you?"

"I-I...get away from me!" Yao Yi cries, shoving Clay away. Nick grabs her shoulder and slams her back against the wall.

"Someone tried to kill themselves!" Nick growls. "Tell us what you know! It has something to do

with Krones now, doesn't it?"

Yao Yi sinks to her knees, murmuring something that the duo can hardly hear. Floris perks his ears up.

"It was...your'e right," Yao Yi says. "It was Mr Krones. He...he asked me to call Adrian to his office and...and...I don't know what he did in there, but...he was in an especially bad mood..." By now, she's barely coherent, tears dribbling down her face, her hands trying her hardest to swipe them away. Nick steps away, making no move to help her up.

"What in the world is going on here?"

Clay whirls around. Shit! He comes face to face with the man of the hour, hoisting a hefty mathematics textbook over his shoulder.

"Cheng? Are you being harassed by them?" He clucks his tongue. "This is a punishable offence, taking advantage of a female student like that. I could easily expel you with a snap of my finger."

"You have no right to talk!" Nick shouts, drawing back a fist. Clay reaches out and grabs his fist, shaking his head. Any form of violence against a teacher would warrant immediate expulsion, and it is clear that Krones holds a power much greater than any other personnel in this school. Nick relents, standing down, fist remained clenched at his side. Krones smirks, and Clay has to physically restrain himself by stuffing his hands into his pockets, or else he'd be pummeling Krones to the ground.

"Come on, Cheng. We should get you somewhere safe, away from these two hooligans," Krones says.

"You're wrong."

Yao Yi picks herself up, trembling. "You're wrong, Mr Krones, and we've spent too long living in fear of you!"

Krones snarls. "What? You dare go against me?"

"I do!" Yao Yi snaps. "You...you hit people during training, you molest your students and the people on your team, and...and..."

Krones holds up a hand, and Clay doesn't miss the way Yao Yi instinctively flinches and leans back. Krones noticed it too, and lowers it, chuckling to himself. Again, Clay can almost see the merge between the Krones in this world, and King Krones in the other world. Almost imagine the cape flowing over his shoulder, the glittering crown on his head.

"That's why Adrian jumped," Clay says. "Darryl didn't want to sleep with you so you took it out on Adrian."

"Noveschosch and Farille, hmm?" Krones says, touching his chin. "They don't know what's best for them, and it's so cute, watching them sacrifice themselves for each other."

"You sick bastard!"

Krones makes a face. "I suppose I'll have to add name-calling to the list, Armstrong. You know what? You three kids are getting on my nerves. I guess I *could* mention your names *and* expel you all at the next board meeting."

"You wouldn't..." Yao Yi's face is a mask of horror. "My parents, they-"

"Your parents nothing. Maybe you dirty chinks should just go back to your own country," Krones says, raising a finger. "Now, if you'd excuse me." He strides off down the hallway, headed towards the faculty office.

Clay chomps down hard on his lip, almost drawing blood. Yao Yi's eyes are shining, her cheeks blotchy. Nick holds out a hand, helping her up, which she accepts.

"Sorry for pushing you so hard," Nick says, scratching his head. "You alright?"

Yao Yi nods. "He said...he'd expel us."

"He won't," Clay says firmly. His expression softens when she offers him a pitiful smile. "Oh, and...uh...sorry he called you a-"

Yao Yi shakes her head. "You shouldn't have to apologise. It wasn't you who said that after all. Also, I'm kind of used to it." She glances at the ground, scuffing her shoes. "Thank you for trying to cheer me up though. I guess...I guess I'll start looking for...other schools I could apply to..."

The air is heavy when Yao Yi takes her leave. Nick looks like he wants to punch the wall again.

"So," Floris says, "what's the verdict?"

"We're stealing his fucking Treasure," Nick says.

"He's beyond redemption," Clay says, nodding.

Floris offers the biggest grin he can, razor fangs bared.

*

[4/16 - THURSDAY - AFTER SCHOOL](#)

"Okay, so...how are we doing this?"

Nick looks down at himself, still admiring his new outfit, which, Clay has to say, looks pretty awesome.

"We're going to need codenames," Floris says. "There's no knowing what effect it'll have on the Palace Ruler's cognition if we kept shouting our real names in the Palace."

"Good thinking." Nick nods, arms folded. "I'm gonna go with Sapnap."

"Sapnap?"

"Pandas, but with an upside-down 'd'," Nick says. He narrows his eyes at Floris, who is obviously keeping his laughter at bay. Speaking of which, Floris has returned to his bipedal form, standing upright wearing that strange blue army's jacket of his. "What? You got a problem with that?"

"It's hilarious," Floris says, tail swishing. "I'm gonna be Fundy."

"Fundy?"

"Yeah, you got a problem with that?" Floris shoots back.

"In that case, I'm gonna be Dream," Clay says. Now he gets weird looks from both Floris and Nick. He shrugs.

"Okay, so Dream, Fundy and Sapnap," Nick says, pointing at each of them in turn, and then himself. "Alright, so let's not forget it and let's go!"

They return to the same air vent they entered from, and thus begins their infiltration of the Palace of Mr Peter Krones, the Castle of Lust.

Chapter End Notes

Nick and Clay learn that to remove someone's desires, they essentially have to steal their Treasure kept guarded in their Palaces. However, with the removal of their Treasures, people will lose all manner of desires, even perhaps their will to live. Unable to bear such a burden should it come to that, Clay and Nick resist Floris' suggestion, and decide to figure out what more they can do by themselves

However, the next day, Darryl's good friend Adrian attempts to commit suicide by jumping off the roof. While barely conscious when found, he does imply to Darryl that Mr Krones sexually assaulted him. He is then brought to the hospital.

It is then that Yao Yi, who seems to know what happened, flees the scene, only to be cornered by Clay and Nick. She spills the beans, that she had an idea as to what Mr Krones wanted when he told her to call Adrian. The three of them confront Mr Krones with Yao Yi's testimony, and Mr Krones does not show any signs of remorse, even going so far as to complain what a nuisance both Darryl and Adrian are. He threatens to expel them at the next board meeting.

Clay and Nick believe that Mr Krones is beyond redemption, and set out to steal his Treasure. They decide on their codenames: Dream (Clay), Fundy (Floris) and Sapnap (Nick) and they return to the entrance of his Palace, to infiltrate the Castle of Lust.

BadBoyHalo

Chapter Summary

Darryl accidentally stumbles into the Palace.

Chapter Notes

Bad's awakening.

So weird writing Muffintees when George isn't present but George will appear...like...slightly after Skeppy i think which is the next Palace

also finally found time to watch dream's 4 hunters holy shit that fishing rod strat and THE FUCKING GOLDEN BOOTS FROST WALKER SHIT REALLY GOT ME.
the fight at the end was so intense knew i was in for a wild ride when i saw 48mins

4/16 - THURSDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"Ow!"

Sapnap tumbles out of their hiding place under the stairwell, Fundy leaping on his back and landing gracefully on his paws. Dream ignores the two of them and begins running up the staircase. He's on the guard patrolling the staircase in a matter of seconds, grabbing its mask like Fundy taught him to break the Palace Ruler's control over them, allowing them to initiate an ambush. The Shadow's mask is ripped off its face, disoriented, black ooze dripping from its being, morphing into a Pixie and a Mandrake, which the three of them dispatch in a matter of seconds.

"I hope that didn't attract anyone," Fundy says, glancing around.

"Why's that?" Sapnap asks.

"The thing is, if we draw too much attention to ourselves, the security level of a Palace will rise," Fundy says. "Shadows will be on higher alert, and if the security level gets too high, we can't infiltrate it anymore." Fundy's tail whips about as he scratches at his whiskers. "You know, for someone who attends a prep school, you sure are dumb."

"I'm *not* dumb. And how the heck was I supposed to know that if you didn't tell me?"

"Shh," Dream hisses. Just down the hallway leading up to a large room with what appears to be long tables and benches, the heavenly aroma of food wafting from within, are several Shadows walking about. The clanking of their boots is unmistakable. Moreover, one of them's got a strange red aura around it. That one's definitely dangerous if even the other Shadows are purposely avoiding it.

They *could* jump them, but Dream believes they're going to get *decimated* if they even got within one inch of that terrible Shadow. He gulps. While he *may* know when and how to keep to himself

in the other world, is that level of invisibility going to apply here? Still, there is no way forward...well, other than another corridor to their right that features a long carpeted hallway flanked by two rows of armor that is currently blocked by a door of iron bars.

Dream presses his back flush against the wall, peering into the mess hall. The Shadows don't seem to show any signs of moving away, content with just walking the same route again and again...and again. The torches flicker overhead, casting ominous shadows on the ground, the clanking of the metal boots driving Dream insane.

When the Shadows' backs are turned, Dream darts from the wall to the long table, crawling under the flowing tablecloth. He glances back, heart stopping when he senses the slightest movement behind him, only to find both Fundy and Sapnap wrestling each other under the tablecloth. God, he can already see the *problems* arising from this...this...

"I heard something," a gruff voice announces from above them. Behind him, Fundy and Sapnap go still. When the clanking footsteps get quieter and quieter, Dream lets out the breath he didn't even know he's holding. He glares at the two nincompoops behind him, who seem to take the hint, and he continues crawling his way towards the other end of the table, where he remembers is near the opening to the next hallway.

[He](#) glances out from under the tablecloth. The biggest Shadow with that dangerous aura is now gone, and he is left with only two weaklings. He manages to kill the first Shadow with a ball of darkness. The second one notices his presence and transforms into a green horse, hooves stomping hard on the stone floor as it rears its head, whinnying and charging, its crimson eyes never leaving its target.

"Oh no you don't!" A burst of electricity travels from the ground Sapnap stands upon, throwing up dust and tiles as the sparks connect with the Kelpie, shocking it to the ground.

["W-Wait!"](#) Kelpie scrabbles against the dirt. "Spare me, please!"

Arsene floats behind Dream, as do Captain Kidd with Sapnap and Zorro with Fundy. Electricity crackles in the air as Dream stares it down, a ball of darkness already gathering in Arsene's palm. Fundy wields a slingshot, prepared to sling those sharp, jagged pellets at the Shadow.

"Hold on a moment," Fundy says. "I'm gonna show you something neat." He turns to the Shadow. "Your money or your life."

"M-Money?" Kelpie fumbles about. "I...I don't have any...money..."

"Oh, uh," Fundy looks almost embarrassed now. "This isn't how it's supposed to go. I guess we can just kill you now."

"Wait!" Kelpie yells. "I can be useful! I know, I can be your mask! I remember now, I'm Kelpie, from the sea of souls." Kelpie's form disappears in a sparkling ball of light, which sails towards Dream, the ball of light merging with his mask.

Fundy stares at the ground where Kelpie once lay, then back at Dream. "What the hell just happened?"

Dream touches his mask. Nope, it's still there, but it seems...weird now. Like there's an extra inhabitant, another Persona he can summon besides Arsene. He glances at the other two. Perhaps if he just imagines Kelpie in his head...His mask disappears, and Kelpie rises behind him, a blue-tinged version of its Shadow self.

["Wait](#), so you can summon more than one Persona?" Fundy looks impressed. "That's really gonna come in handy." He puts away his slingshot. "I always knew there was something special about you."

Just as Fundy finishes saying that, the trio hears a scream coming from the hallway they just came, as well as the screech of metal scraping against metal. That scream sounded distinctly like...

["That](#) idiot!" Sarnap shouts. There's no mistake. That voice can only belong to one Darryl Noveschosch. Dream glances back at the hallway where they had come from and finding comfort in the fact that the strong Shadow from earlier is not patrolling it, he leads their ragtag group back down the hallway. The other connecting corridor which had been blocked off earlier is now open, and at the end of it lies a wooden door hanging slightly ajar. One can hear a terrified crying from within that room.

Dream kicks the door wide open, the piece of wood creaking painfully, nearly falling off its hinges. Greeted with the scene before him, Dream sees red.

Darryl is cuffed up to what appears to be a cross of some kind, the metal handcuffs keeping him bound spread-eagle to the cross. Standing between Darryl and them are Shadows with their swords out, with a certain Shadow Krones standing with them, fist raised high, as if berating the grovelling Shadows.

Shadow Krones turns around at the intrusion, expression of anger turning into a smirk. "So, I knew little rats had entered my Castle. Of course it'd be the lot of you."

"You guys?" Darryl asks, eyes wide. "What are you doing here? What's happe-eek!" Darryl shuts up immediately when one of the Shadows stabs a sword into the cross, missing his stomach by merely an inch.

"Let him go, Krones," Dream says. "Or you won't like what happens next."

"Oh, won't I?" Krones says sweetly. "I don't know why you want to save him. That piece of scum can never compare to my prince Noveschosch."

Dream furrows his brows. What does he mean by that? Isn't Darryl right in front of him?

"Oh, my King!"

A sickly singsong voice resonates within the room, and Dream can only stare as a near-perfect replica of Darryl, dressed only in a set of tight-fitting briefs. Dream almost gags when the Darryl-replica throws himself all over Krones, crooning and swaying his hips like some kind of exotic dancer as Krones wraps an arm around his middle.

"That's what Krones thinks of your friend," Fundy says. "This *is* part of his cognition, after all."

"You're kidding, right?" Sarnap says, taking a step forward. "That's goddamn sick! Dream, we're taking him down!"

"You sure about that?" Krones says, raising his other hand. Dream glances around at the sound of Shadows bursting into life around them, bleeding from the walls and the floor. Showing up at the entrance to the hallway is that giant, dangerous Shadow with the fiery red aura around it. Dream gulps. Crap. He hadn't expected that hulking giant to be summoned as well!

"Now you can watch," Krones says, grabbing one of the swords from one of the Shadows and stabbing the blade in Darryl's direction. "You can watch as your friends die in front of you. Again."

"Are you just gonna stand for that?" Sappnap shouts. "Remember, this guy is the reason that Adrian-"

"I *know* that!" Darryl shouts. His head is lowered, staring at the ground. "I *know* that I'm useless. I almost let Adrian die in front of me and now..."

The Shadow behind them burst into its true form, a violet monstrosity perched on a toilet bowl, assuming the Thinker position, large eyes trained on its new targets. With a talon, it scratches its horns. Given its size and the sheer power that Dream can sense radiating from it, this guy is one of the big bosses in this Castle.

"I..." Darryl starts, but grits his teeth, seized by a sudden burst of power that even Dream can feel from where he stands. The toilet-bowl-demon attacks, a blast of ice knocking Dream clean off his feet. Fundy quickly follows up with a healing spell, mending any damage from gashes and frostbites. Dream picks himself up, summoning Arsene to defend himself against the onslaught of attacks.

My...it's taken far too long. Tell me, who is going to avenge him if you don't?

Darryl grunts, tossing his head back, beads of perspiration matting his hair to his forehead.

Forgiving him was never the option. Such is the scream of the other you that dwells within...

"What the hell-?" Fundy starts, watching in awe as a pillar of blue flame surrounds Darryl.

I am thou...thou art I. We can finally forge a contract...There you go.

Fire circles his wrists like a flower of flame, igniting the handcuffs, burning the metal to charcoal crisps.

Nothing can be solved by restraining yourself. Understand? Then I'll gladly lend you my strength.

The silhouette of a woman emanating the hottest of fire appears behind Darryl whose feet tap the ground lightly. Billowing around him is a cape of black rimmed with red, checked scarf and pants infused with the heat of fire, white boots donning his feet. The blackest of masks appears on his face outlined in white, horns protruding from its forehead.

"Come to me. Carmen!" He grabs the mask and tears it off in one sweeping gesture. Zigzagging lines of flame towers from beneath the Shadows, leaving nothing but floating ashes behind.

"Why you-!" Krones shouts. "Belphegor, get them! Kill them all!"

The toilet-bowl-demon, Belphegor, unleashes a raging snowstorm, icicles swirling in the maniac draft. Dream throws up an arm to shield himself. Fundy leaps onto his shoulder, unleashing a tornado of its own. Combined with Darryl's own unforgiving flames, a firestorm drives Belphegor back. Blossoms of fire bloom around the demon, rendering even its terrifying form nothing but a weakling beneath their power.

When the room returns to normal, Krones has fled, along with that horrible rendition of Shadow Darryl.

Darryl collapses, the last vestiges of power burning out. He pants heavily as Carmen disappears, his mask forming on his face once more.

"Are you okay?" Sappnap asks, bending down on his knees.

"H-Huh," Darryl looks down his hands, clad in black gloves. "That was...that was..."

"Do you feel freer now?" Dream asks, standing over him with a hand on his hip.

Darryl laughs, a sound happier and more content than Dream has ever heard. He coughs, rubbing at his nose, only for him to recoil when he touches nothing but the mask. He rubs at the mask.

"W-Wait, what *is* this?" Darryl grabs at his face, or rather, the mask.

"Now you're one of us," Fundy says. Darryl stares at him.

"Wait," Darryl says, reaching over and patting Fundy's ears. Hold on, Fundy *never* let neither Dream nor Sapnap do that. "You're the fox with Clay." He lifts his head to look at Dream. "I thought he was your pet." Also, what happened to "I'm not a human?" Why does Darryl get special treatment?

Dream frowns when he hears Fundy purr. Fundy...purring...even though he is a fox... "Nope. He's just a parasite that forced himself onto us."

"Hey!" Fundy cries, snapping his jaws. "I'm *not* a parasite."

"In any case, you gotta be exhausted," Nick says. "How 'bout we explain it at KFC or something?"

With Sapnap and Dream's help, Darryl stands, body completely drained. Dream can relate. If not for adrenaline carrying him through their first escape, he'd be dragging his feet the whole time as well.

*

[4/16 - THURSDAY - EVENING](#)

"So...Personas, and Palaces and that Mr Krones was the ruler of that Palace?"

"Something like that," Clay says, snatching a fry from Nick's plate. Nick glares at him.

"And Floris can speak?" Darryl says, taking another bite of his drumstick.

"Yeah," Floris says, curled up in the seat between Clay and Darryl. "It seems that only people who have gone to the Metaverse can hear me speak in your language. To others, I'm just a yipping fox."

"I see," Darryl says, staring down at his burger.

"I thought you went with Adrian to the hospital. How did you get into the Palace?" Nick asks.

"His parents came," Darryl says. "They told me I could go home. I pass by the school on my way home from there, though, then I saw the two of you and suddenly I was right in front of some castle or...something..." He carries Fundy into his lap and scratches behind his ear. Fundy continues to purr and yip. "I tried to follow you, but then I was captured by some guards and stuff..."

"You have a powerful Persona, I've got to say," Floris says. "How would you like to join us in stealing the Treasure?"

Clay perks his ears up. Right now, they're a little short on manpower, but if Darryl comes on board, then they'd stand a better chance at getting further into the Palace when they encounter stronger and stronger enemies. Even Nick seems to be waiting with bated breath.

"Ah, about that," Darryl says. "I was wondering if the real Mr Krones will know what happened."

"He won't. For sure," Floris says. "That Krones you saw in there is just a Shadow version of his real self. It's what he sees himself as. Whatever happens in there, the real Mr Krones won't know."

"I see," Darryl says, dipping his head, and for a split second, Clay was certain he'd say no. When Darryl looks up at them, Clay sees a fire in his eyes that he never had before. He smiles.

"I'm coming along," Darryl says. "I'm...I'm a bad friend for not seeing what happened to Adrian and what Shadow Krones said was right. I wasn't someone Adrian can depend upon." His fingers tighten on his drink. "But now, there's something I can do to avenge Adrian, so I'm gonna do it."

Clay holds a hand out to Darryl, who takes it and shakes it firmly. Nick does the same.

"Welcome on board," Clay says. "We're glad to have you."

*

Weapons Run

Chapter Summary

Tubbo appears + the hunt for weapons

Chapter Notes

Super short bc profs have this thing where they just upload the slides/tutorials 1 day before the lesson. And u have like an 8hr long day of lects and tuts

OK i lied george is gonna appear later than i expected oops

??/? - ??? - MIDNIGHT

"It seems that you have been able to forge bonds with your newfound friends," Igor says, leaning back against his chair. Clay still can't get over how deep his voice is, and he doubts he'd ever will. Justine and Caroline flank him, clipboard in Justine's hands and a baton in Caroline's.

Igor continues, "Nicholas Armstrong, the Chariot. Floris, the wheel of Fortune. Darryl Noveschosch, the Lovers. And of course, your group of vigilantes, the Fool."

"The Arcana..." Clay mumbles to himself, though he's not quite sure what that means. Chariot, Fortune, Lovers, Fool. He's heard of those terms being used in tarot readings before.

"Indeed," Igor says. "By strengthening the bonds between yourself and your confidants, I am sure you will gain exceptional power that will aid you in your rehabilitation." There's that word again. Rehabilitation. "Hmm?"

"Master, I can sense another presence from within the inmate," Justine says. "Perhaps he has..."

"Without a doubt, he harbours yet another Persona within him," Igor agrees. They must be talking about Kelpie. "Very well. I shall grant you my power. The power to fuse Personas."

"Listen up, inmate! You'd better be grateful that our Master is showing you so much compassion," Caroline says, kicking the metal door of his cell. On Justine's end, she is already wheeling out two devices that Clay is rather familiar with, seeing it all the time in history books.

Two guillotines, with a stylized letter "V" carved onto their sharpened blades, takes centre stage.

"You may execute two Personas to bring forth a stronger one from the depths of your soul," Igor says. With a flick of his wrist, he pulls two spheres of light that burst from Clay's chest, and for some reason, Clay suddenly feels much lighter, yet more vulnerable. He watches as the two Personas he had within him, Arsene and Kelpie, appear by the guillotine, trussed up and powerless to stop whatever's coming next.

"My liege," Arsene says, voice bold. "I may leave for now, but I am a part of you. We will surely

meet again."

On Justine's command, the two guillotine blades fall. Clay squeezes his eyes shut the moment they do, only to be greeted by a burst of white light, a completely new character springing forth from the originally-hideous amalgamation of the two Personas: a green, stout humanoid with blunt, stocky limbs and pupil-less eyes. "My name is Mokoi," the green humanoid says. "I am a part of you now." Mokoi blinks out of existence, and a weight settles on Clay's soul.

"That is how a Persona fusion goes," Igor says. The two guillotines are wheeled away. "In time, you will be able to create stronger and stronger Personas, which will help you overcome the trials that lie ahead."

"I see," Clay says and bows his head. "Thank you."

"Hmph," Igor says, that uneasy omnipresent smile on his face. "You do not need to thank me. As a Wild Card, you must be prepared to use everyone around you, including myself, to achieve your goal." With a wave of his hand, Clay loses strength in his legs. He manages to at least make it back to his bed, as warmth envelopes him.

"Time to go back to your fleeting moment of rest, inmate," Caroline says, the last thing Clay hears before the incessant ringing of the alarm clock.

*

4/17 - FRIDAY - EARLY MORNING

The train is terribly crowded today. Nick and Clay are pressed up together as the train barrels towards Enderlands High. Floris squirms in Clay's bag, irritating a couple of commuters who shoot them dirty looks, but Clay has learned to expertly ignore such gazes. Well, they get some breathing room at the next station, at least, with a few people getting off.

The train rattles and shakes as it sails along the path, swerving so hard that an elderly lady was nearly knocked off her feet.

"Here, Miss."

A boy stands and gestures towards his seat. The elderly woman smiles and begins to hobble over, only for someone else to take that seat, a rather rotund businessman who proceeds to fall asleep in a matter of milliseconds.

"O-Oh." The boy's voice is meek.

"Do you want me to wake him up?" Clay asks, approaching them. The elderly woman thanks them both, but insists that it's fine. Clay returns to the middle of the carriage with Nick watching the whole thing.

"Hey, that's the honour student," Nick says. "The one who got in through the audition."

"Audition?"

"Yeah, he's a year younger, but he kinda gets special treatment 'cause he's supposed to bring honour to the school through soccer or tennis or something."

Clay hums, watching the boy make conversation with the elderly lady. He seems nice enough, though the world can be cruel sometimes.

"Next station, Ender Hills."

"That's our stop," Nick says, shoving his phone into his pocket. "Hey, is Floris still there?"

Clay pokes at his bag, and Floris sticks its head out, to the chagrin of the people around them.

"I'm still here. God, it's stuffy," Floris mutters.

"It's our stop," Clay says ignoring that comment, and they alight from the train.

*

4/17 - FRIDAY - AFTERNOON

"You there," Mr Jacobson, Clay's Social Studies teacher, points at him with a stick of chalk, "the Devil's Dictionary mentioned something that must be present in order for a society to improve. Do you know what that is?"

Clay blinks owlishly, staring at Mr Jacobson, who stares back, arms folded, waiting for an answer. Clay doesn't remember reading about this in his textbook? Could the teacher have gone through this while he wasn't listening?

"Uh..." Clay tries his hardest to ignore the glowering stares around him. "Villains."

"That's correct," Mr Jacobson says. "Now, everyone please continue reading the text..."

Clay breathes a sigh of relief. At least he probably got a little smarter from that...

When class wraps up, Clay and Darryl make their way up to the rooftop to meet with Nick, concerning their actions for the rest of the day. They pass by the faculty office just as the door opens, almost hitting Clay in the face.

"Ah, I'm so sorry...oh!" the student who opened the door just so happens to be that blond kid that Clay and Nick saw on the train. "I...I didn't get a chance to thank you on the train then."

"It's fine," Clay says, waving it away. It wasn't a big deal, though that man *was* kind of rude.

"Smith?" A *very* familiar voice sounds from within the room, and Darryl shrinks away when a Mr Peter Krones appears in the doorway. "What are you...?" He narrows his eyes when he sees them. Clay stands his ground, meeting those steely eyes of his with his own unrelenting gaze. "Oh."

Krones laughs. "These boys are bad influences, Smith. You don't want to get involved with them."

The boy, Smith, glances from Krones to Clay and Darryl. "I...oh, you are the...delinquent student?"

So rumours even spread to someone who'd just transferred into the school...

"Let's not waste time on them," Krones says, "and remember what we talked about."

"Y-Yes," Smith says, nodding. He shoots Clay and Darryl an apologetic look, and hurries off.

Mr Krones sniggers and saunters off back to his office. Darryl is the first one to begin walking again, this time with determined footsteps, towards the rooftop.

*

4/17 - FRIDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"Right, so, first things first," Nick says. The four of them are gathered at the rooftop, the very same rooftop that Adrian jumped from, the only secure meeting location in their school. They are seated at the bunch of broken desks and chairs, beside some planters. Nick rocks his chair, legs kicked up on one of the desk. "We need weapons."

"Weapons? I like the sound of that," Floris says, nodding approvingly.

"What I don't get," Clay says, "is how your slingshot and weapon worked in the Metaverse. I mean, how did you just...magic pellets out of nowhere?"

Floris cackles. "Let me let you in on a trade secret. The thing is, I don't actually *have* any pellets."

"I...I don't get it," Darryl says, shaking his head.

"Alright noobs, listen up," Floris says, leaping up onto a desk and straightening his posture. "You know how the Metaverse is based on cognition, right? When you saw me take out that slingshot, you thought that I was gonna shoot something."

"Yeah. You wouldn't take it out otherwise," Nick points out.

"That's the thing. The very fact that you thought I was gonna shoot the Shadow with pellets lets you see the pellets," Floris says. "Likewise, when the Shadow sees that I have my weapons out, they'd think I'm gonna shoot, so if they think it, it's gonna happen. You just need to do it confidently."

"That kinda...makes sense? I guess?" Nick glances at Darryl, who is nodding, and Clay, who is just touching his chin absently.

"I guess you just need to know that as long as the enemies think they're real, they're essentially real. Doesn't matter if it's a toy or not," Floris says. "So, uh, does anyone know any good weapon shops around or something?"

"Well..." Clay glances at the others. Naturally, he wouldn't know anything, since he just moved here. And Darryl doesn't seem like the type of person who'd seek out such s-

"I know a place," Darryl says. "I went there with Adrian...once."

"You do?" Even Nick seems surprised.

"I expected nothing less!" Floris swishes his tail happily. "Great, so let's head there now. Darryl, lead the way!"

*

4/17 - FRIDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"So, um, here it is," Darryl says. The shop is located down a seedy alleyway, beer bottles and ruined newspaper scraps littering the ground. A shop with flickering greet letters above it: UNTOUCHABLE stands out in this dreary alleyway filled with other drab stores. Darryl pushes the door open, the bell overhead jingling. The shop smells faintly of polish, or some kind of equipment smell. And cigarette smoke. Tons of it.

The only person in this store is an older man in a green-and-white-striped hat, a black jacket

thrown over his shoulders. A stick hangs from his mouth, his legs kicked up on the counter as he reads what appears to be a magazine on guns. Not that Clay would know.

"Hey," the man swings his sandal-clad feet off the counter, chucking his magazine behind him. "I've never seen your faces around here before."

"I came here before, but that was a long time ago..." Darryl says, fidgeting with his bag strap. "A-Anyways, we'd like to buy some guns."

"Some guns, hmm?" the man says, stroking his chin. Chin filled with stubble, Clay notices. The man sizes them up, then goes back to leaning against his chair, placing his hat over his face. "Nope. Personal policy: I don't help noobs."

"What?" Nick cries. "What kind of customer service is that?"

The man peeks out from under his hat, an amused little smile dancing across his lips. "Man, you really cause a ruckus. Fine, what do you want? An automatic? A rifle?" He grins. "A rocket launcher?"

That was easy. And rocket launcher? They sell those here?

"Something that looks real. Since you're minors, you're not legalized to carry real guns," Floris coughs, "or buy them, for that matter. But the gun doesn't have to be real in the Metaverse to work."

Makes sense. "Something that looks real," Clay repeats.

"Looks real, huh? So you don't want a real gun. Yeah, you seem like kids," the man says. "Alright, here's what I got for you."

He opens up the cupboard behind him and whips out several guns - a pistol, a shotgun and an submachine gun. "These are all that I've got for now. I *might* get new stock later on. Other models, that is."

"Oh, ask him if he has other weapons like daggers and stuff."

"Daggers?" Darryl asks.

"Yeah. I mean, that submachine gun isn't gonna be useful at short-range, right? And what if you run out of energy and you can't summon your Persona? A weapon like that can actually save your life," Floris says.

"Do you have any other weapons that are not guns? Like, uh...daggers? Or something?" Nick asks. The man raises a brow. "I mean, it doesn't have to be real."

"What? You kids gonna try to rob a bank?" the man says. "Still, toy knives won't get you far. I guess I could sell them to you. What're you looking at?"

"Well...what do you have?" Clay asks.

The man turns back to the same magic cupboard that he retrieved those firearms from and throws out a knife, a cudgel, a whip and a saber. Clay stares at the counter as the weapons clatter onto the glass counter.

"We'll take them," Nick says quickly. "How much?"

"Eh, upwards of a hundred thousand."

"What?!"

The man smirks. "What'd you expect? These are top quality goods. *But* I do pity you kids...tell you what. I'll give you guys a discount for now, but don't expect the same treatment next time."

The discounted price is just within their budget and with some of the money earned from fighting Shadows in the Metaverse, they're still left with at least fifty between the three of them. They leave the store with their purchases in two large plastic bags, the barrel of the submachine gun sticking out from one of them. Clay is holding the toy pistol in his hand, weighing it. It feels almost real, and holding it instills within him a sense of exhilaration.

["Right.](#) so we can go into the Metaverse now?" Nick asks.

"We could, technically," Floris says, "but I wanna be more prepared first. We don't know what we're going to fight in there."

"Good point," Clay nods. "So, what's the plan?"

"We need medicine," Floris says. "Come to think of it, there was a clinic in Jule Halls, wasn't there?"

"He's a quack, though," Nick says, scratching his head. "People say he's been selling his own homemade medicines. It sounds kinda shady, if you ask me."

"Hmm, sounds like just the guy we need!" Floris yips. "Come on, think about it. We can't get prescription medicines off a legitimate clinic, but if we can strike a deal with a quack..."

"But what if we get poisoned?" Darryl asks.

"I think it'll be fine," Clay says. "I think it's best if we rest for today. We can infiltrate the Palace tomorrow after we get our medicines."

"Besides, tomorrow's a Saturday, so we'd have more time," Nick says. "Aaaaand I have unfinished Literature homework."

They part ways at Valentine Hills' train station, totally *not* looking suspicious with bags of weapons. Naturally, they garner many stares on the train, but it's not like anyone wants to bother with two teens carrying a bag of guns and who knows what in there.

The train rattles all the way back to Jule Halls.

Castle of Lust: Infiltration Begin

Chapter Summary

Medicine Run + Choose BadBoyHalo's code name :)

Chapter Notes

Enter SmallishBeans and oops this is more of a boring chapter but i think next one should be much more interesting

Oh noes midterms coming up

Also (for p5/p5r players and/or p5a viewers), currently, BBH = Ann, Philza = something like Iwai + Sojiro, SmallishBeans = Takemi, Tubbo = Kasumi, Krones (OC) = Kamoshida, Yao Yi (OC) = Mishima

[4/17 - FRIDAY - EVENING](#)

"So, this is...the quack's clinic?"

Nick and Clay are standing outside a dilapidated building, with peeling walls, ruined plaster and twining creepers. It doesn't even look like it's inhabitable, let alone serve as a clinic for a respectable physician. Maybe the doctor really *is* a quack. Clay wouldn't be surprised to find ice picks and bubbling purplish liquid simmering in cauldrons inside.

Tentatively, Clay pushes the door open, the metal door scraping against the tiled floor and producing the most terrible screech. Clay grits his teeth, and steps into the lounge.

Never judge a book by its cover, is what Clay would tell himself every time from now on. Despite its unappealing appearance of its exterior, the interior of the clinic is surprisingly clean and well-furnished, even with the hint of sterility in the air. At least there isn't human experimentation going on, or swirling potions in a cauldron, for that matter.

"Welcome!" the doctor behind the counter sports a somewhat-handsome look, clean-shaven with his hair gelled up. No matter how welcoming he sounds, Clay feels a little pinned down by those inquisitive eyes, as if they're staring straight into his soul. Clay glances at the nameplate on the counter, the name "Joel" in a cursive font engraved on it. "How may I help you today?"

"Uh...I'd like some medicine," Clay says. "Just some...over-the-counter medicines."

"Well, people usually go to the pharmacy on the other street for those," Joel says, hands on his hips. Clay's mouth dries. Well, he hadn't considered that.

"You sell them cheaper," Nick chimes in.

Joel raises a brow. "Don't know where you heard that." He seems to think on it for a while, then

jabs a thumb to a door adjacent to them. "Look, why don't we talk in the back?"

Why in the world does this clinic sound shadier than that weapons shop?

The examination room that Joel has invited them into is about the same size as the lobby. He sits on his rolling chair and leans back, a clipboard in his hand as he pens something down. "So, what do you need?"

"Uh...some painkillers, I guess. For now."

"For now, hmm?" Joel says. "Sure. Paracetamol good for you? I don't deal with coke or heroin, just saying."

"Yeah," Clay says. Paracetamol is like...medicine for fevers, right? And Clay definitely won't be wanting either of those other drugs. Joel grabs three boxes of paracetamol off the shelf. "Twelve bucks."

That's cheaper than Clay thought. *Much* cheaper. He pays Joel with whatever money they have left and they leave the store just as a woman enters it.

She is a plump woman in a gaudy, sparkly pink jacket over a pristine white blouse and an equally pink skirt. Well, other than her flashy appearance, the other thing of note about her is that she refuses to let them leave, standing in front of the door to block their way.

"Excuse me," Nick says, but the woman stands her ground.

"Are you patients at this clinic?"

"We just came to buy medicines," Clay says. "We'd like to leave n-"

"Rivers, what are you doing here?"

Stepping out from the examination room behind them is Joel, leaning against the doorjamb, with a tight smile on his face. "You want something examined?"

"You know that's not it," the woman, Rivers, says. "What have you been doing to those children?"

Clay bristles at that. He's not a child.

"They just wanted to buy some medicines," Joel says. "Paracetamol, which I happen to sell. Certified. I promise."

Rivers eyes them with contempt as Clay reaches his hand into his bag to retrieve a packet of paracetamol, waving it in front of her face. She finally lets it go, and gestures to the examination room with the most unpleasant expression on her face. Joel seems to take the hint, waving her in and closing the door behind him, mouthing something to them that Clay couldn't catch.

"That looked hella suspicious. Let's get outta here," Nick says, scratching his head.

Clay deposits the paracetamol into his bag, then frowns. "Floris is gone."

"Shh!" Floris' voice comes from the door, a perked-up ear pressed flush against the door. "Listen!"

"Eavesdropping is bad," Nick says.

"Fine, be that way," Floris says, sniffing. "She's saying something about some strong medicine,

though. Strong medicine not yet released to the general public for some kind of incurable illness..."

"Isn't that kinda dangerous?" Clay asks.

"Maybe, but the doctor didn't seem like a bad guy. I don't think he'd poison us or anything," Floris says. "Anyway, we got what we came here for. We can ask about the medicine some other time."

*

4/18 - SATURDAY - DAYTIME

"So, here we are."

Dream stands outside the Castle of Lust once more, this time armed with a pistol in a holster fastened to his belt, and a dagger in its sheath slotted in on the other side. Sapnap, Fundy and Darryl have come equally equipped, ready to take on the legions of Shadows roaming in the Palace.

"Wait, we need a code name for him," Sapnap says, gesturing towards Darryl. Dream shifts his weight from one leg to the other. If he were to be very honest with himself, he thinks that Darryl's mask is the coolest out of all of theirs, with those horns and that white outline emphasizing the eye holes. Not to mention that silky, flowing cape...

"Code name?" Darryl asks, head tilted.

"Yeah," Fundy says, jumping onto Dream's shoulder. "I mean, there's a practical reason behind it, but don't you think it's just cool?"

Darryl blinks. "I guess?"

"I feel bad calling you Demon, or Devil," Sapnap says, scuffing his shoes. "Uh...maybe you can pick for him."

"We all picked our own names, though," Dream says.

"Can I be...uh...BadBoyHalo?"

Darryl shrinks under the stares from the three of them.

"No offence, dude, but you are, like, the polar opposite of *bad*," Sapnap says. Dream has to agree.

"O-Oh. I mean, that was my username..."

"Why not we just call you, uh, Bad?" Dream asks. "I mean, BadBoyHalo is definitely too long."

"Sure!" Darryl looks so happy about it that none of the rest of them can really complain.

With the code name settled and out of the way, now they can really concentrate on the infiltration. Dream tightens his fingers around the grip of his dagger as he leads them back through the air vent, boldly into the castle.

*

Castle of Lust: Infiltration Middle

Chapter Summary

In the midst of infiltration.

Chapter Notes

curious how long this momentum will last...

this is my most action packed chapter ever

4/18 - SATURDAY - DAYTIME

Bad, as they realize, is a strong ally. It's almost like he's a different person in the Metaverse, a demon of blazing hellfire incinerating all that lie within his path with nary a hint of regret, watching as Mandrakes, Cait Siths and Silkies burst into clouds of ash. Dream watches as yet another Agathion falls victim to Bad's Agi spell, leaving a blackened scar in the felt carpet.

"You're...actually pretty good at this," Fundy admits the moment they enter a safe room. Bad responds with a shy smile. Dream flops onto the couch, Sapnap following right after. Infiltration is harder work than he had imagined but they can't give up. Or else Krones would just continue with his terrible ways. Dream removes his mask, and flips it around. The material is hard, though he isn't too sure whether it's plastic, metal, porcelain or...well, clay.

They rest for a few minutes, leaving the room after they've caught their breaths. Down the hallway is a series of traps involving flying arrows and swinging wrecking balls, but it's nothing the group can't handle. Dodging some strong Shadows, finding a couple of treasure chests skillfully hidden away later, they come to what appears to be a ballroom, with a single table in the middle of it surrounded by metal bars reminiscent of Dream's jail cell back in the Velvet Room.

"Hey, there's something there," Fundy says, wriggling and squeezing and managing to actually worm between the bars. He leaps onto the table and rolls up that lone piece of parchment. He is just about to wriggle his way out again when suddenly, the table overturns, a Shadow rising from beneath.

"Holy crap!" Sapnap yells.

"Language!" Bad cries (he's yelled this word so many times that at this point, Dream thinks it's just instinctive). "Fundy, get out of there!"

"I'm trying!" Fundy hisses.

"Agathion!" Dream summons his Persona, electricity zapping the Shadow before it has a chance to act. The mask flies off the Shadow's face and the Shadow morphs into a knight on a horse, the horse whinnying and bucking. Good Lord. Fundy grunts as he extricates himself from the cage.

With a mighty swing of its sword, the Berith cuts the cage in two, the metal bars sizzling and melting before their eyes.

"Go, go, go!" Sapnap shouts, already leading the way to the next room, throwing open the door that leads down another hallway that seems to stretch for miles. Behind them, the Berith is on their heels, slashing at wallpapers, the thumping of hooves and the swish and woosh of the sword deafening in Dream's ears.

"Silky!" Icicles spear from the ground, halting the Berith in its tracks, even for just a second, giving Fundy time to turn the corner, paws on a lever. Sapnap rushes in with Bad.

"Fundy, now!" Dream shouts. His thighs are screaming, air can't enter his lungs fast enough. He's got a metre or so on the Berith which is closing in ever so quickly...

Without hesitation, Fundy pulls the lever and the iron door begins to descend. Faster than Dream expected. Dream sprints and slides, right beneath the iron door, before the iron door slams shut behind him. The Berith's furious growling can be heard from behind the door. Dream lies on the ground, limbs spread out, panting heavily.

That was the most exercise he's gotten in, like, forever.

"We almost died," Sapnap says, leaning against the wall. "Still, what was that, Fundy?"

Fundy unrolls the piece of parchment he nicked from the table, which is what got them into this mess in the first place. Dream glances around. The hallway is long and empty, with a closed door off to their right. They probably wouldn't have to worry about any Shadows for now.

"It's a map," Fundy says. "Judging from where our last safe room was...I'd say we're about here." Fundy gestures to a spot on the parchment. Indeed, the layout of the hallway and rooms seem to fit in with their mental map of the place. Just ahead appears to be a church of sorts, a few pews and a pulpit visible from where they are sitting.

"I'm sensing the Treasure in that direction," Fundy says, rolling up the parchment and stuffing it into his jacket pocket. "Let's go!"

The church is quieter than Dream expected, devoid of people. Light reflects through the stained glass above the pulpit. Several stone statues depicting Krones' face flank the rows of pews.

"I thought you'd show up here, filthy thieves."

Dream reacts the moment he hears an arrow slinging right at them. He throws himself forward and grabs it in midair, right before the arrow, tip dripping with a colourless liquid, stabs into Bad's shoulder. Bad freezes, staring at the arrow as Dream snaps it in two, dropping it to the ground. Metal bars rise from the hallway they came from. Dream grits his teeth. Were they caught in a trap?

The Shadow which had spoken looks vastly different from those they had encountered so far dressed in suits of iron armour. This one is clad in gold, wielding its own golden sword effortlessly, hovering above them with wings sprouting from its back.

"My patience has been rewarded! I shall claim my glory by striking you down, right this instant!" the Shadow transforms into a stern-faced angel, its wings more prominent, its blade just that much longer. Raising its sword, close to a dozen Shadows pop up from the ground around them, armed to the teeth. These must be the elite warriors, a different breed from the small fry they had fought up to now.

"Up! Now!" A wire springs from the contraption on Fundy's wrist, a contraption which he had fastened onto each of their arms just before the infiltration. Dream taps the rose-coloured button, heart racing a mile a minute as a thick wire shoots from the contraption, coiling itself around a chandelier overhead. As fast as it had extended, it contracts, heaving Dream off the ground and flying through the air.

Dream does a back flip, landing on the chandelier, followed by Sapnap and Bad. With another push of the button, the wire slips back into the contraption, as if it had never existed. Fundy is already leaping off the chandelier and onto a balcony, paws soundless against the marble tiling. Sapnap and Bad make the jump easily as well, landing on their feet less gracefully than Fundy, but at least they're all safe.

"Dream! Behind you!" Sapnap shouts.

Dream barely has time to glance behind when he has to duck, a blade missing his head by inches. The blade, however, does not miss the fixture keeping the chandelier attached to the ceiling. The chandelier begins to fall at the same moment Dream launches himself off of it, activating his grappling hook again, which Fundy and company grab.

"Alright, hoist him up!" Fundy shouts.

With the combined efforts of the three of them, they manage to haul Dream to safety.

That was too close calls in too short span a time. Dream is...just..*lucky* to be alive right now. Bad springs to his feet, arms outstretched. "Carmen!"

A fiery sphere erupts from his palm, sailing right past Dream's hood, singing its edges, colliding into the Archangel that had appeared right behind them. Sapnap follows up with some electricity for good measure and they begin to run through a doorway, slamming the door shut the moment Dream is through, each of them trying their hardest to catch their breath. Dream is bent over, fingers clutching his kneecaps, chest painful with the effort of respiration.

"That...sucked," Sapnap grits out, back pressed against the wall, a palm flat against his sternum.

"Lang-" Bad starts, stopping with wide eyes when a sword stabs through the door, in the space between Sapnap's arm and chest.

"Move!" Dream screams, and they run.

*

["How](#) low are you?"

"Pretty," Sapnap says, an arm thrown over the backrest of the couch. They had managed to find another safe room right at the intersection of several hallways. Dream tosses Sapnap a piece of bread he bought just before entering the Palace. Sapnap greedily gobbles it down.

The door is pushed open, and Fundy and Bad walk through.

"How's the situation like outside?" Dream asks.

"Strong Shadows. The hallways are filled with them," Fundy says. "I think it's best if we come back another time. The security level's too high to continue."

Oh, yeah. Fundy *did* say something about security levels and how they'd affect the sensitivity of

the Shadows to intruders. What's more, the Shadows currently patrolling are high-level guards. If they are lucky, probably those on the same level as Belphegor, Archangel and Berith. On the other hand...

"We can leave through the window, right?" Sapnap asks, gesturing towards his left. The window is large - big enough for them to fit through. The moat and drawbridge are in full view. From the looks of it, they can leave the castle from here, and come back using their grappling hook the next time.

Problem is, how are they going to get down? Use the grappling hook as an abseiling tool?

"Yeah, that works," Fundy says, grinning. "I'm gonna show you guys the best infiltration tool I've got!"

The three of them gather around Fundy, who whips out a large black pearl from, apparently, nowhere. It glimmers in the dim light of the safe room, its edges tinged with a deep green hue, its middle an ominous pitch black.

"This is an Ender Pearl," Fundy says. "Basically, you use it like...so..." He hurls it at the other end of the room. The moment the Pearl lands with a thud, it cracks, splits open and Fundy is gone. Instead, he appears right where the Pearl has dropped, in a magical display of smoke and mirrors.

"Wait, that's basically...teleporting," Sapnap cries. "Why'd you give us a grappling hook then?"

"Well, I'd like to see you throw this shit up three levels," Fundy sniffs. He hurls one to each of them and scampers over to the window grille. "See ya, suckers!"

"Hey! Language!" Bad shouts, but Fundy is gone in a puff of smoke. When Dream leans over, Fundy is already on the ground, waving to them. Dream drops his Pearl straight down and hears the sharp crack as it smashes into the ground, and in an instant, he's outside the castle. A little dizziness, a little wobbly on the legs, but otherwise, he's feeling pretty damn good. Sapnap and Bad land beside them. Fundy has laid the map out on the ground and marks the safe room with an 'X'.

"So, we'll just remember it's that one," Fundy says, pointing at the safe room's window. "Well, we'll come back some other time, when the Shadows have calmed down."

"Let me know when you do," Bad says.

"Alright, so let's disband for today," Dream declares. "Fundy, how much longer do we have to go?"

"Yeah, we don't have much time," Sapnap says. "The board meeting's on May second. If we haven't covered a lot today, we're gonna have to pick up the pace."

"The thing is," Fundy says, tapping a pen (where was he keeping that?) against his muzzle, "we've only got one half of the map. And frankly, I think we've covered almost half of the castle. That's what my nose was telling me, anyway."

"Huh, so we just need to find the other half," Dream says, arms folded.

"Yeah," Fundy says. "Though, it could be a trap like the first one, so we gotta be careful."

Dream reaches for his phone and activates the MetaNav, the app that allows them to traverse between the Metaverse and reality.

"Exiting Palace. Thank you for your hard work."

*

4/18 - SATURDAY - EVENING

"Hey."

Nick throws Clay a mop.

"Instead of freeloading, maybe you can mop the floor or something."

Clay stares at the mop in his hand. He's never done housework in his life. Besides, this isn't those kinds of mops he has back at home, with strands of cloth attached to one end that soaks water up and, uh...this one is completely flat at the bottom and...A packet of what appears to be wet wipes hits Clay in the face.

"Ouch. Did it get in your eye?" Nick snickers.

"How in the world do you use this?" Clay asks, looking from the weird city mop to the packet of wet wipes that still look like wet wipes no matter how he squints at it.

Nick teaches him how to fasten the dampened cleaning pad onto the flat end of the mop, and how he's supposed to use that to mop the floor without needing a bucket, albeit with a ton of laughing and sighing. Nick, on the other hand, takes care of hanging the laundry out to dry and taking out the trash, all while Clay is preoccupied with getting every spot in the house.

"You're sparkling," Nick says, smirking from the doorway to his room.

Clay wipes perspiration from his forehead as he stabs at Nick with the mop. "Don't push your luck."

At least housework can give Clay something to do when he's too exhausted to leave the house. It's only five in the afternoon but he already wants to turn it. Screw dinner.

"I'm ordering takeout. What do you want?" Nick asks, already pulling out his phone.

"What do you recommend?"

"Well, there's Big Bang Burger, if you want that," Nick says. "Not as good as Chicken Kitchen, but it's something different, at least."

"Yeah, sure, whatever," Clay says, leaning against the wall. Mopping the floor is taking a lot out of his back. Why is he so weak when he's outside of the Metaverse?

"Wait, I've got a better idea," Nick says, an evil grin on his face. "Let's take the Big Bang Challenge."

Have a Short Rest

Chapter Summary

Dream looks for a part-time job and Lovers Social Link/Confidant begin

Chapter Notes

WARNING: Reference to suicide when spending time with BBH

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

4/18 - SATURDAY - EVENING

"What the actual shit is this?"

Clay stares at the humongous burger in front of him, a towering stack of meat and vegetables and cheese and more meat and vegetables and cheese...hell, it looks taller than *he* is.

"It's rumoured that no one has ever finished the Big Bang Challenge, Clay," Nick says, chomping into his own normal-sized burger. Floris picks at a fry. Can foxes even *eat* fries?

"You tricked me!" Clay glares at him.

"I tried the challenge last week, before you came," Nick says. "That thing is too rich. You can't eat it more than once a month."

"Oh yeah?"

"Uh huh."

There is a kind of static electricity crackling in the air between Clay and Nick, their eyes never leaving each other's even when Clay takes his first bite of the Big Bang burger. He scrunches his face up at the taste. Are the bragging rights even worth the pain? The patty is too sweet, the vegetables taste raw, the cheese is hardly melted...He takes another giant bite.

Nick has *challenged* him, and Clay *never* backs down from a challenge. He will finish this burger, even if he's going to rip his stomach apart to do it. Floris just looks amused.

Naturally, the challenge remains uncompleted.

"Even I got further than you," Nick says. "Pathetic."

"Pathetic," Floris echoes.

Clay is trying not to puke as he lies on the floor on his back. "You two shut up. This isn't even worth bragging about."

"It will be if you're the first one to ever finish it," Nick says. "Anyway, I guess we're having burger

tomorrow for lunch."

"That thing? For two meals in a row?"

"There's supper and breakfast in between."

"No supper," Clay groans as Nick readies a large container to place the burger in. "Maybe no breakfast too."

"Uh huh. Anyway, it's getting late," Nick says, digging his toes into Clay's thigh. "If you need to throw up, do it in the toilet."

"I won't throw up," Clay says. "I've got dignity."

"Oh, by the way, I can't, uh, go on any Palace excursions tomorrow," Nick says, scratching his head sheepishly.

"What? Why?" Clay asks, peeling himself off the ground.

"Part-time job. And enrichment classes." Nick sighs. "My life sucks."

"Speaking of part-time jobs, I need money."

Clay trails behind Nick like a puppy asking for a treat. Nick settles himself at the study desk, typing away at that large computer, the CPU whirring like crazy. Clay climbs up to his bed, Floris on his shoulder.

"I'm not your dad," Nick says without sparing him a glance. "Go earn your own money."

"Maybe you could introduce me to your part-time job."

"There are a couple of magazines on part-time jobs at the station. Let's grab some the next time we're there."

Clay pouts. Floris yawns and curls up next to Clay's pillow. Clay suddenly thinks back to the mountain of homework he has not yet done, groans, and flops onto his back. He'll do it tomorrow. Nick is a monster for being able to do homework after such a tiring Palace run.

Within seconds, Clay's exhaustion wins out, and he falls asleep, Floris snoring silently beside him.

*

[4/19 - SUNDAY - DAYTIME](#)

"What about that one?" Floris says, pointing at an ad in the magazine for a part-time assistant at a florist's. Florist. Floris. Clay bites back a snigger. Floris glares at him.

"I was thinking about something simpler," Clay says, eyes skimming over an ad for a busboy.

"Convenience store employee. That's what young people nowadays, right?" Floris says. "Look, young people do this. You're a young man. You should, therefore, do it."

The pay isn't too bad, and Clay just needs to go for an interview, so it should be fine...right? Besides, the working hours are in the afternoon, so he wouldn't be breaking curfew. Still, convenience store employee? Really? Now Clay is curious about Nick's job. What *is* he doing? Clay digs his phone out and dials the number listed at the bottom of the ad.

"Hello? I'd like to apply for the-"

"The part-time employee? Of course. Please report in on Wednesday. Thank you!"

The call ends, and Clay is just left listening to the dial tone. What in the world just happened?

"At least, uh, you got the job, right?" Floris says. "Wednesday, they said?"

"Yeah." Clay slips his phone back into his pocket. Now he's got the whole day to himself. What should he do?

*

4/19 - SUNDAY - DAYTIME

"Ah, Clay." Darryl looks up from where he's staring at a lavender handbag, his cheeks somewhat red. "I didn't expect to run into you here."

"Neither did I," Clay says, shrugging. "What are you doing?"

"O-Oh," Darryl glances around. "I'm just...uh..."

"You like handbags?"

"Oh, not really. They're not for me," Darryl says. "Adrian does, though. He has a collection. It takes up most of his bedroom space." Darryl laughs. "I was hoping to get him something as a get-well-soon gift."

That's really sweet. And kind. "Mind if I help?"

"I'll help too!" Floris calls, sticking his head out from the bag.

Darryl smiles. "Thank you so much." He leads them over to a rack with two bags, one with a leopard print and the other made of shiny black leather. Clay can only stare slack-jawed at the prices. Just...just how rich is this boy?

"The thing is, this one's kind of Adrian's style," Darryl says, gesturing to the leopard print one.

"But he's scolded me for spending so much on him before." Clay's eyes dart between the two price tags. There isn't that big of a difference in...uh...price. "So I was wondering whether I should buy that one instead."

"Do you always buy gifts for him?"

Darryl shakes his head. "Usually just for special events like his birthday, but this..." He fidgets.

"I...I mean, this time, it's..."

Clay can still remember the scene vividly, that shocking image of Adrian standing just inches from the edge of the rooftop, staring down at the ground below. What must it have felt like? The despair, the willingness to end it all? What must have been going through his mind? The need to run away? The fear of facing yet another day, knowing someone viol-

"I was such a bad friend," Darryl says, hanging his head. "I couldn't even see what happened to him. I couldn't even be there for him when he needed me."

"Don't say that," Floris says, ears drooped. "You care for him, a lot. That's why you're here now."

Clay nods. "He's right. Adrian was your best friend. He must have cared for you as well. Maybe he wanted to protect you, and that's why..." He trails off, but Darryl understands.

"Thanks," Darryl says, eyes shining. "I guess we do, huh? Quite a pair we make."

Warmth crawls up Clay's chest. Perhaps he understands Darryl a little better now.

"Anyway, you should get what you think suits him best," Floris says. "I'd say the leopard print one since it looks really cool."

"But the price-" Clay starts.

"Thank you," Darryl says, smiling. "I think I'll go visit Adrian soon, when he wakes up. Or after we finish stealing the Treasure. Whichever comes first."

They part ways at the train station, and Clay decides to head back to the Armstrong residence.

*

4/19 - SUNDAY - EVENING

Mrs Armstrong is at home today, dealing with work at the dinner table, with Nick nowhere to be seen. She does not even acknowledge Clay when he walks through the door, Floris still in his bag.

Clay heads up to his and Nick's shared room, where Nick is busy playing some kind of multiplayer game on his computer, and lets Floris out, who proceeds to scratch at his snout.

"Hey," Nick says. "I got a present for you."

"Present?" Floris asks, eyes lighting up.

Nick makes a face. "Not you. Clay. It's on your bed. Actually, it's a game my boss' kid didn't want, but I already have it."

"Oh." Clay ascends the ladder to his own bed, and finds a the disc casing of an old PC game that was quite the craze back in his middle school. That was a couple of years back. "Do people still play this?"

"No, not really," Nick says, not looking up where he's riddling another player's avatar with bullets. "It's multiplayer, but there's a single player campaign option too, if you're into that."

Perhaps Clay can give it a whirl sometime to spice up his boring life when they're not risking their necks in Palaces. That is, if he can get his hands on a laptop. He left his old one back at home, but it was disintegrating anyway. Even booting it up takes a couple of minutes. Well, in any case, he's gotta save up for a laptop, so he'd best get cracking on that part-time job.

Clay lays down on his stomach, pulling his homework out from his bag. Maybe he should ask Nick about whether there're any good shops selling electronics nearby.

"Hey, we're infiltrating tomorrow, right?" Clay asks.

"I'm good. You gotta check with Darryl, though."

The night is spent doing homework with the sound of tapping keys and a stream of curses exploding from Nick's mouth, Floris yelping and screaming while nestled on Nick's head.

Ah, life.

Chapter End Notes

For anyone interested: Lovers rank 1 -> 2, knowledge + 2 .

btw fool (igor), fortune (fundy), chariot (sapnap) are at rank 1

dream's stats: guts: milquetoast, knowledge: oblivious, proficiency: bumbling,
kindness: inoffensive, charm: existent

Castle of Lust: Infiltration Core

Chapter Summary

entire chap is infiltration

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

4/20 - MONDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"Did you see the looks that he was shooting me?"

Nick kicks the table leg which scrapes against the ground. Floris jumps at the sound.

"No. I wasn't even in the same class as you," Clay mutters.

Nick seems to seriously consider this. "Good point. Anyway, Darryl's showing up, right?"

As if on cue, the door burst open and Darryl emerges, face all red, nostrils flaring as he staggers over to them, a hand held up. "I'm sorry I'm late...oh my muffin..." He nearly collapses on a nearby chair.

"Whoa, man, you alright?" Nick asks.

"Fine. Just, hah, let me catch my, uh, breath," Darryl says. He clears his throat. "I almost got caught with the stupid gun." He gestures towards his bag, unnaturally-shaped. Or rather, it's in the shape of his submachine gun. How did Darryl even fit that in his bag? Clay has many questions.

"Alright, so we're continuing infiltration," Floris says, leaping up onto the desk. "Last we checked, we still have at least another half of the castle before we reach the Treasure. We need to find the other part of the map today, to get a sense of how far we have left."

"Sounds like a plan," Nick says, nodding. "So, shall we go?"

Darryl looks at Nick like he's just grown two heads.

*

4/20 - MONDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

Dream is the last to zip through the air up into the safe room they had left through the other time. He can sense the drop in security level of the Palace even from the outside. Fundy is already peering through the door, beckoning them over when the coast is clear. The number of dangerous Shadows has decreased, thankfully, but there are still enough lower-levelled Shadows patrolling the hallways that they don't want to draw attention to themselves.

The first room they enter is right across the hallway from the safe room, into a giant room filled with bookcases as tall as the room itself. Could this be a library? There doesn't seem to be any Shadows here, so they should be safe.

"Hey, what's this?" Fundy picks up a book lying, open, on the ground. "The Prince and Princess book?"

"Dunno," Sapnap says. "It looks different from the others."

Indeed, it appears to be the only one with a leather cover and spine, as compared with the other books bound by string.

"Should we take it?" Bad asks. Upon unanimous agreement, Dream tucks it into his coat. They try scanning the other bookshelves for any such books they may have missed, but there are none. They leave the room.

The hallway at the far end is blocked off by a mechanism with a circular indent, and according to the map, that appears to be the only way onward. They do come across several bookshelves with similar leather-bound books, named the King and Slave books respectively. The final room they have yet to explore is a central, much bigger, library that doesn't have anything of the sort.

"Are you serious?" Sapnap looks around them, arms folded. "There isn't anything here."

"No, wait," Dream says, gesturing to a gap between the books. "It looks like we can put one of the books in here." He slots the Prince book in, the book sliding in as easily as a hot knife through butter.

"We have three books," Bad says, glancing around. "And there are three different bookshelves."

"This is a puzzle," Fundy says. He climbs onto Dream's shoulder and inspects the titles of the books.

"Hey, Bad," Sapnap says, squinting at one of the spines, "Adrian's name is here."

Bad stiffens. "Adrian?"

An idea strikes Dream.

"Fundy, can you check those books over there?" he asks. Fundy scampers over to the other bookshelf and tilts his head.

"Uh...these are all on that Palace Ruler, Krones," Fundy says.

"And these are the names of the people on the volleyball team," Sapnap says, having moved to yet another bookshelf. "Do you think...?"

"Yeah," Dream says, tossing Sapnap the Slave book and Fundy the King book. He holds onto the Prince and Princess book himself. "On the count of three, okay? One, two, three."

The bookshelves begin to rumble and move aside the moment the books slide in. The central bookshelf, the one Dream is standing at, shifts, books falling to the ground, as it swings outwards, almost shoving Dream to the ground had he not leapt away fast enough. A small cavity is carved into the space behind the bookshelf, though what is inside horrifies them to the core.

[The](#) room is nothing more than a shrine dedicated to both Adrian and Bad, a shrine with lewd photographs tacked onto the wall, candles burning around the desk, casting unholy glows onto the walls. Photographs aren't the only things here. There are several other incriminating items such as handbags hanging from nails on the wall, a red-and-black hoodie that Bad always wears in the real world, and several pairs of underwear.

"That bastard..." Sapnap hisses, and Dream has half a mind to ruin the whole setup. Tear it down with his own bare hands.

"You alright?" Fundy asks, tugging at Bad's robe. Bad is staring at the ground; he can hardly bring himself to look at it.

"Fundy," Dream says, jerking his chin at the doorway. Taking Bad by the robe, Fundy leads him out of the shrine, while Sapnap and Dream look for clues. Krones, albeit his Shadow self, hid this room through that elaborate mechanism. Surely there must be something that he wants to keep a secret from potential intruders here. Potential intruders like themselves.

"Hey, check this out."

Sapnap holds up another thick piece of parchment, depicting what appears to be the second part of the castle, including a giant courtyard and several turrets. The throne room lies all the way in another, larger building past the courtyard. The circular room behind that appears to be some kind of secret vault, and more suspicious than anything.

"Is this..." Dream picks up a golden medal, depicting a star on its front and words engraved onto its back. Peter Krones, Olympian medallist... "It could fit in that indent, couldn't it?"

"No harm in trying," Sapnap says. "Anyway, let's get out of here. Being here gives me bad vibes."

[Bad](#) and Fundy are still outside, having a casual conversation about something or other than Dream cannot really catch. They cease when the group reunites. Upon informing Fundy and Bad of the items they found in that room, the group decides to head out towards the hallway with that indent, evading the numerous Shadows along the way. Dream slots the medal into the indent, and the hallway opens up to a wooden door at the very end.

Dream pushes the door open, revealing a giant courtyard behind it. This must be the courtyard that he saw on the map.

And there sure are a lot of dangerous Shadows here.

"Do we really have to sneak past all of them?" Bad asks, worrying his bottom lip between his teeth.

"If worst comes to worst," Fundy says. "I don't see how we can make use of Ender Pearls either." The expanse of the courtyard is just too huge for that matter. "Do you see anything, Dream?"

"How about there?" Dream asks, pointing to a thin wall bordering the courtyard. Perhaps they can make use of that somehow? Well, here goes nothing. Dream grabs a Pearl from his pocket and tosses it at the wall with acute precision. The Pearl cracks as it makes contact with the wall, and Dream finds himself suspended in midair for a fraction of a second before his limbs decide to move, fingers grasping onto the edge of the wall, dangling just above a dangerous Shadow that doesn't seem to have noticed his presence.

With great effort, Dream hoists himself up onto the wall, having to catch his breath from the effort. Soon after, he is followed by Sapnap (who would really be in hot water had Dream not acted quickly and caught his leg with his grappling hook wire), Fundy and Bad (who did it the most skillfully out of the lot of them). What bumbling Phantom Thieves they are. Still, this route provides them a short cut, a way they can make use of without being detected.

Running along the castle wall leads them to a window in a turret, and Dream leaps into the building, coming face to face with a descending Shadow.

"Oh crap!" Dream yells (on instinct. Purely on instinct) and summons Silky, encasing the Shadow in ice before it has time to transform. Sapnap jumps in and follows up with a powerful swing from his cudgel, shattering the Shadow in one strike. Fundy and Bad enter right behind them.

"I heard something!" A voice shouts from further down the staircase. "They must be up there!"

"Damn," Fundy mutters. Bad glares at him. "Come on, we gotta go."

Tiptoeing to mask their footsteps, they bound up the staircase and come across a safe room at the far end of the hallway. Fundy throws the door open, and they cram into the significantly-tinier safe room that looks more like a storage room than anything, what with all the crates and barrels and kegs lined up against the wall, barely giving them enough space to breathe.

"Where did they go?" the Shadows' voice is thunderous, especially when Dream is certain they are merely inches from the door. In the silence of the room, he can hear clearly the beat of their hearts, louder than the whispers of their breaths. Footsteps trail off, till the exterior is once more silent. The four of them let out a collective, relieved sigh. Sapnap, being the nearest to the door, cracks it open ever so slightly, only confidently opening the door when the Shadows are gone.

"That was close," Bad says. Fundy is already hopping on over to the bridge lined with swinging axes. Getting hit by one can slice you cleanly in half. Below the bridge is a pool of bubbling lava.

"Isn't that the same statue that we saw in the dungeons?" Sapnap says, inspecting a familiar-looking stone statue.

"Same statue?" Bad asks.

"Yeah, when we first came, we were thrown in the dungeons," Dream says. Sapnap *does* seem to be right on this aspect. The statue is indeed of the same design as the one in the dungeons, the one they used to lower the drawbridge to escape from the guards. However, this one happens to have empty sockets. Pulling on its jaw the same way Fundy did back in the dungeon doesn't work. Or at least, it doesn't do anything yet.

"Maybe we need to find its eyes," Fundy says. "They're probably like keys."

"But where'd we look?" Sapnap asks. "I mean, they could be anywhere."

"An enemy has them," Dream says. "Think about it. They're essentially keys, right? It would make sense that something like a gatekeeper would hold on to them."

"Yeah, I was thinking about that too," Fundy says. "Let's go downstairs. That's where those Shadows came from, right? Maybe the gatekeeper is amongst them."

Dream hums and is already making his way down the staircase, with Dream, Sapnap and Bad on his heels.

Chapter End Notes

Dream's current persona stock (4/6):

- Silky
- Agathion

- Cait Sith
- Mokoi

Castle of Lust: Infiltration Finale

Chapter Summary

securing the infiltration route to peter krones' treasure

Chapter Notes

only able to post so often since each chap is so short

also i apologise if i get the holidays and school life etc wrong cos like the only thing i know about american schools is from like social media, books and sometimes tv shows/movies. i tried doing research and found out that different states have different holidays? not quite sure how some holidays are celebrated like thanksgiving apart from what i see from above listed sources so sorry if it's inaccurate...

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

4/20 - MONDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"That's the one."

There is only one dangerous Shadow this time clad in golden armour, surrounded by several lesser ones. Dream wonders how important it is, how *powerful* it is, to command a legion of so many other Shadows. There's no doubt that that Shadow is the one holding on to the keys. Question remains is: can they beat that thing?

"How about we just pickpocket it?" Sapnap suggests.

"Yeah, go Sapnap," Dream snickers. "I'm sure you can do it, digging your fingers under all that armour."

Sapnap scowls. "I mean, it's worth a shot, ain't it? I'm not sure we can fight that."

"Maybe we can pull off some kind of diversion," Bad asks. "Like, to lure the smaller ones away. Then we can probably take on the bigger Shadow."

"I think that just might work," Fundy says. "Although, how do you intend on doing that?"

"One of us has to act as the bait, maybe to lure the smaller Shadows up these steps and then hide in the safe room," Bad says. "I doubt the stronger one would come for us itself. Then, when it's alone, the other three of us can try to take it down, or at the very least, steal the key from it."

"Well, no pain no gain," Sapnap says, cracking his knuckles. "So, who's gonna be the decoy?"

"I can do it," Bad says. "I mean, I was the one who came up with the idea. Sapnap and Dream are better than me in terms of raw power anyway. Fundy's the only one who has a healing spell, so he should stay with you guys."

"But-" Sapnap starts, brow furrowed.

"Here," Dream says, tossing Bad a packet of paracetamol. "If you get hurt, run to the safe room immediately and eat these, okay?"

"But you can't take more than two pills every-"

"In the Metaverse you can," Fundy says. "Normal medicine doesn't work the same way here."

Bad nods, pocketing the medicine.

"Alright," Dream says. "Let's get to work."

*

"Hey! Over here!"

From their vantage point right beneath the staircase, hidden from view by a few conveniently-placed pillars, they can hear Bad's voice clearly, as well as the several Shadows chasing him up the turret. As expected, there are a couple of strays, but with Sapnap and his combined power, they manage to tear through their ranks of Kelpie, horses weak to fire.

"What? Who are you?" the golden-armoured Shadow hisses, stabbing its spear at them.

"Give up the eyes," Dream says, holding out his hand, "and we won't hurt you."

The Shadow stares at him, then throws its head back, laughing with so much vigour that it almost doubles over, clutching its stomach. Dream narrows his eyes.

"You? Hurt me? Don't make me laugh," the Shadow cackles. "By now, your friend is probably dead, and you will follow him straight to Hell!" The Shadow changes form, its armour melting like metal into a messy goop of gold. A horseman rises from the puddle of goo, similar to, but looking stronger than, the horseman they escaped from just the other day.

"Oh boy, here it comes!" Sapnap shouts. He grabs his mask which disappears, forming up Captain Kidd that towers over the Eligor. Electricity crackles in the air as Captain Kidd slams its cannon into the Eligor, sending bolts of electricity zapping through its body. Eligor screams, spear swinging wildly, almost taking Dream's head off.

"Electricity seems to be its weak point!" Fundy shouts, nose twitching. "Dream, do you have Zio skills?"

Dream summons Agathion. It's not as strong as his other Persona, but it's the best he's got. Agathion does not give Eligor a moment to rest, zapping it into submission with yet another sphere of crackling sparks.

"Now! Attack!" Fundy shouts the moment Eligor plummets to the ground. Eligor gives a screech, attempting to defend itself with its rampaging hooves and swinging spear. Out of the corner of his eye, Dream sees it. The glow of orange and green. Orbs that glimmer in the red moonlight. The two eyes they're looking for, snug in between Eligor's breastplate and body.

"Boss!"

Shit! Dream's head snaps up, staring at the legion of Shadows that seem to have significantly reduced in number. Bad's done good.

"Where did the other one go?" Eligor shouts, blocking Fundy's sabre with its own sword, the clanking of blades drowning out the voices of the other Shadows. Adrenaline rushes through Dream as he dives under Eligor's horse, narrowly dodging its stomping hoof, and aims his gun at the crack between its breastplates, one eye shut.

There is a resounding crack as the bullet sails through Eligor, two spheres flying from Eligor's body. Fundy seems to have noticed, as he leaps into the air and grabs the both of them - one in paw and the other in his teeth.

"Let's move!" Sapnap shouts. "Ender Pearl! Now!"

The remainder of the Shadow legion has already descended the stairs, rushing them with swords, some of them already having transformed into their demonic forms: Incubus and Succubus, bat-like wings flapping noisily as they charge towards them. Dream slips his pistol back into its holster as he scrambles to his feet. He digs through his coat pockets, closing his fingers around the Ender Pearl and hurls it past the Shadows.

Dream, Sapnap and Fundy reappear past the crowd, the keys still in Fundy's paw and mouth. When they reach the top of the stairs, they find Bad waiting there, luckily unharmed, at the statue, arms outstretched, palms open.

Fundy spits the orange orb from his mouth. "Bad!" The keys leave Fundy's paws, sailing in a perfect parabola into Bad's waiting hands. Bad fumbles with the green one, but shoves the eyes into the statue. Krones' eyes light up, and Bad pulls its jaw. Immediately, the swinging axes stop, leaving their path clear.

"Get them!"

Unfortunately, the Shadows are not far behind. The foursome waste no time in dashing across the bridge, mindful not to stare too long at the lava pool below. Once they're on the other hand, Dream summons Cait Sith, watching as the Shadows attempt to cross the bridge.

"So long!" Dream shouts, and with a deft swing of its cutlass, Cait Sith severs one of the axes, blade falling from the ceiling and cleaving the bridge in half. The bridge begins to disintegrate, wood splintering and creaking, pieces of plywood plunging into the lava pit below. The Shadows shriek as they are submerged in the lava, and once they do, they scream no more.

The other Shadows, terrified, retreat, and the pursuit is over.

["Oh](#) yeah!" Sapnap cries in victory, holding up his hands, which Dream high-fives readily, the maniac grin never leaving his face. Bad high-fives them as well. Even Fundy folds his paws, looking impressed.

[Dream](#) unfolds the map on the ground, the second piece, that is, and stabs a finger at the bridge of swinging axes, which has now dissolved in the lava below.

"So, we were just here," Dream says. "That means the throne room is just up ahead."

"Man, we came all this way and we still haven't found the Treasure?" Sapnap says, pushing his panda mask slightly further up his head. He rubs at his eye. "How much longer do we have?"

Fundy's nose is in the air, whiskers twitching. "The Treasure is close. I can feel it. I think it's in the room just past the throne room."

"So we're almost there?" Bad's voice holds relief.

"Yeah, I'd say so," Fundy says. "Come on guys, let's go."

With renewed spirits, they make their way down the curving hallway and finally come face to face with the double doors that would lead to the throne room.

*

[Like](#) shadows in the night, the four of them slink past the numerous statues shielding them from the view of tens of Shadows gathered in the throne room, with Krones standing at his throne, booming voice issuing a speech that has all the Shadows cheering and hollering. Dream flinches at that, but at Fundy's paw on his back, he continues scurrying past the statues, to the room at the very back.

Dream edges the door open, gritting his teeth when the hinges creak. He glances behind him. They haven't been noticed yet. He continues pushing the door till it's open wide enough for them to pass through. The four of them squeeze in, and Dream shuts the door behind them, collapsing against the door.

"All this sneaking around's going to give me a heart attack one day," Sapnap says.

"I have to agree with you there," Bad says.

"Look, guys!" Fundy runs over to a treasure hoard, bars of gold and mountains of coins flooding the room. A blurry shape floats above a giant treasure chest, a cloud of sparkles that resembles nothing at all.

"What's that?" Sapnap asks.

"That's the Treasure," Fundy says, looking awfully starry-eyed.

"The Treasure? But it's just..." Dream tries touching it, only to be met with little resistance, the cloud flowing beside his fingers as his flesh passes through it. "How are we going to steal it?"

"I'd answer that, but I think we should get out of here first," Fundy says. "We've secured our infiltration route, so all we have is one last step."

"Well, if you say we should leave, then I guess we should," Sapnap says. "How are we leaving by?"

"I saw a safe room on the way here," Fundy says. "It leads to the back of the castle, but we can always go around to the front." Indeed, they must leave the Metaverse from the same place they entered it. Fundy had explained it to Dream and Sapnap late one night. Fundy marks the Treasure's location on the map, and Dream and company follow him to the safe room.

*

[4/20 - MONDAY - EVENING](#)

"So, what's this last step?"

Darryl's voice is somewhat higher-pitched through video call and the resolution is kind of grainy, but it's not like they have a choice, considering that it's already past their curfew. They barely made it in time, five minutes before seven, barreling through the door, much to the chagrin of Mrs Armstrong. She chided them on the proper manner to enter the house - quiet like a mouse, shoes placed neatly on the rack.

"We need to send a calling card," Floris says. "Or something like that. Basically, we need the target to know that we are going to steal their desires."

"What does that even mean?" Nick asks, laying on his bed, scrolling through Twitter.

"I told you, right? The Treasure of a Palace is the root of the manifestation of the Palace Ruler's desires. If we steal that, then they will no longer feel their desire, I think," Floris says. "So, you guys remember that the Treasure was kind of cloudy, right?"

"Yeah," Clay says. "So by sending the calling card-"

"We're getting them to be conscious of the fact that their desires is something that can be stolen. Then, when they are aware, it would affect their cognition, and then the Treasure will materialize, which is something that we can steal."

"I see," Darryl says. He shifts on his bed, pulling his hoodie over his head. "Then when shall we do it?"

"We can't get hasty," Floris says quickly. "You see, the effect of the calling card only lasts a day. Once they have gotten over the idea that their desires can be stolen, the same effect cannot be induced in them again, and we'd lose our only chance."

"So this is a do-or-die thing," Clay says. Worry tugs at him. They have only one chance to send the calling card, dive back into the Palace and steal Krones' distorted desires. Only one chance.

"Yeah," Floris says. "Also, we're not sure what might happen, so it's best we be prepared. Clay, since you're the leader, I think you should decide when to send the calling card."

"Wait, since when did I become the leader?" Clay raises his voice over Darryl and Nick's chorus of agreement.

"You're the strongest one here, the one who can wield multiple Personas," Floris says calmly. "I think you should be the leader here, honestly. You've been leading us quite well."

Clay bites his lip. This sounds like a huge responsibility. Leading them into a heist, in a Palace borne of cognition...but still...He sighs, hand on the nape of his neck. "Fine, I guess I can do it."

"Great," Floris says gleefully. "I knew I could count on you. Remember that the board meeting that Krones is going to report you in falls on May second, so you have to send the calling card at least two days before that."

"I see," Clay says. They have a couple more days. Not too many that they would get lax, but not too few that they should panic yet. "How are we going to deliver the calling card, though?"

"We should place it somewhere that Krones can see it," Darryl says. "Why not stick it all around school on the bulletin boards? It would catch his attention eventually, right?"

"Yeah, sounds like a good idea," Floris says, smiling. "So, who's gonna prepare the calling card. Or, uh, cards, if we're doing that."

"I can do it," Darryl says. "I've got quite a few art materials lying around...though, what should it say?"

By this point in time, Clay zones out. It almost feels like a fever dream, as if in the next few seconds, he'd blink and awaken and all this would never have transpired. All these events would

just be like a fleeting dream, a figment of his imagination. He would be back living a dead-end life with that stain on his record. He'd be forced to be a good student and score decently well at tests, made harder by the fact that Enderlands High is a private prep school, and he wouldn't be experiencing the adrenaline rush even now, the same excitement he'd feel when he gets on a roller-coaster, or when he swam in that raging sea, or when-

"Hey, earth to Clay."

Clay snaps out of his reverie. "What?"

"Do you have an idea when you want to send the calling card?" Darryl asks innocently.

"The thing is," Clay says, averting his gaze, "I have a part-time job on Wednesday. And we shouldn't exert ourselves, so maybe we can stick the cards up on Thursday?"

"Immediately after sending the calling card, we'll have to enter the Palace," Floris says. "We should make sure we're prepared. Get better weapons, if that weapon shop guy has them and stock up on medicine. Come to think of it, we can ask whether that doctor has that stronger medicine that he was talking about with that woman."

"Right," Clay says. "Okay, I guess I'll update everyone later, after my part-time job. So, Darryl, do you mind getting the calling card ready by Thursday? We'll have to get to school extra early to put them up."

"I think it should be fine," Darryl says.

["And](#) that should be it, right?" Nick says. "After we steal Krones' Treasure, he won't be..." He stares out the window, not meeting eyes with Darryl. "There won't be anymore victims."

The room falls silent.

"Yeah," Darryl says, the first one to speak up, with a fire in his voice. A fire as fiery as Carmen's flames. "We'll get him. I have to do it. For Adrian and myself."

Clay smiles.

"In the meantime, don't go and stir up trouble, okay? Especially the two of you," Floris says, pointedly looking at both Clay and Nick. "That's all for tonight. We'll see you soon, Darryl!"

Darryl logs off of Skype, and the only sounds in the room the incessant whirring of Nick's computer.

Clay ascends the ladder to bed, tired from the Palace excursion. Thursday. He has until Thursday to think about this. He shuts his eyes, but the only images he can visualize are those of King Krones, that terrible, terrible shrine dedicated to his lustful thoughts of Darryl and Adrian. The looming castle takes the centre stage, crawling with Shadows and pitiful innocents.

It's up to them to put a stop to it once and for all.

Chapter End Notes

Hi for non-smt/persona players, there are several elements at play here which i may

use the smt/persona term for them:

Agi -> Fire. The element that Carmen, BBH's persona, controls.

Bufu -> Ice. Only Dream has ice skills at this point in time mainly used by Silky

Zio -> Electricity. Sapnap's Captain Kidd's element.

Garu -> Wind. Fundy's Zorro's element.

Frei -> Nuclear skills. Used by a char not yet introduced

Psi -> Psy skills. Used by a char not yet introduced

Kou -> Bless (Light) skills. Used by a char not yet introduced

Ei -> Curse (Dark) skills. Arsene's element

Dia -> Healing skill. Currently only used by Fundy

Guinea Pig

Chapter Summary

SmallishBeans Social Link/Confidant start :) at long last infiltration is over all thats left is final preparations

Chapter Notes

will probs be posting less frequently this coming week cos midterms :/ so yeah

wonder whether i can still reach my goal of 1 chap a day lol

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

4/21 - TUESDAY - MORNING

"Dreaming again, are we?"

At the first syllable, Clay snaps to attention. Crap, he was dozing off. History is just...boring.

"If you are so smart, young man," his History teacher says - what was her name again? Miss Jenkins? - tapping the chalk on the board, "perhaps you'd like to tell me which of these three sports Emperor Nero won in the Olympics."

Clay stares at the options on the board. Music. Theatre...? Chariot racing? When were those even sports in the Olympics?

"Uh, chariot-racing?"

Miss Jenkins sighs. "He was the *Emperor*. Naturally, he won all of them."

"Oh well," Floris mumbles from his bag. "Though, doesn't that emperor remind you of Krones?"

All around him, Clay can hear his classmates murmuring. He pretends not to notice, and re-enters his trance-like state.

*

4/21 - TUESDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"Strong medicine? I don't know what you're talking about," Joel says with a tight smile on his face. Clay stands at the counter, hands tucked into his pockets.

"You were talking with that woman from the other day. Rivers or something," Clay says, shrugging. "You wouldn't happen to be brewing your own medicine illegally, would you?"

Joel looks down at his papers. "I've got a license."

Clay shifts uncomfortably. He wasn't expecting that. "Then why was that woman mad?"

"Oh? Her? I don't think I'm at liberty to tell you all about my life story." There is an edge in his tone, a razor edge that makes Clay realise he's treading on thin ice. "If there's nothing more, then I think you should leave. And don't come back unless it's a medical emergency."

"I need that medicine," Clay says abruptly. All manner of cordiality dissolves from the air. "It's for...it's for my exams."

"Your exams, hmm? Wow, you're really desperate." Joel rises, angling his head at the examination room. "Go on in and we can talk more inside."

The examination room looks more foreboding than Clay remembers it. That skeleton in the corner looks like it may spring to life at any moment. Silence is broken by the drone of the fan overhead...is that some distillation setup over there? Joel settles down at his usual seat by the computer.

"That medicine is going to be expensive, and it's not completed yet," Joel says. "The only thing I'm lacking now is a good human guinea pig for my clinical trials."

"When is it going to be finished?" Clay asks. The sooner the better.

"That's the problem right there," Joel says, sighing. "You see, I'm kinda exiled from the medical community, and you know that woman? She was my old boss, and now I can't get permission to conduct any clinical trials because she's shutting down all my options."

"Hey," Floris says, voice muffled by Clay's bag. "You should become his guinea pig. It's a win-win!"

Clay thinks for a moment. It's not going to be too dangerous, right? Though they'd stand a better chance at defeating King Krones with this medicine...

"I've got an idea, you desperate teen," Joel says. "Why not participate in the clinical trials? I've been putting ads out in the papers, but there has been no response so far. If you agree, I'll sell you more types of medicine, okay? The good stuff. No prescription meds, though, unless you come in for a proper checkup. What do you say?"

"Well, he beat us to the punch," Floris mumbles.

"It's not going to be dangerous, right?" Clay asks, chewing on his lip.

There is a mischievous twinkle in Joel's eye. "You can always back out now if you want."

Is that a challenge? "I'll do it."

Joel beams. "That's the spirit. Alright, I have a sample here that I need you to drink immediately."

"Wait, now?" Clay stares at the glass of pungent liquid that Joel is pushing into his hands. The rust-coloured liquid swirls, almost like a tiny whirlpool has formed within. Bubbles coat the sides of the glass, tinged purple.

Clay has never seen such an abomination in his life.

"Well," Clay says resignedly. "Bottoms up."

He doesn't see the expression on Joel's face when he downs the whole thing with, as Floris would

remind him later, little care for his health.

"I didn't think you'd actually drink the whole thing," Joel says. "We should see the effects soon, though."

Other than a few pinprick sensations along his throat, Clay feels fine. That is, until the smell catches up to him. His vision swims before him and clouds seem to have made their home in his head. He vaguely remembers Floris calling for him, or Joel's intrigued face, but when he really comes to, when his senses have cleared, he is staring up at a whitewashed ceiling, unfocused eyes following the movements of the rotating fan blades.

"There you go," Joel says, tapping a pen on his clipboard. He has discarded his white coat, the article of clothing draped over the back of his chair. "You're not in danger of death; don't worry. I think what really happened was that you passed out from the stench."

Clay hangs his head. God, the smell was terrible. He'd never wish that upon anyone.

"Still, that really helped, so thanks a lot," Joel says. "I just need to tweak the formula a bit...Oh right, when you feel fine, you're free to go. I'll see whether I can get new stock in for new medicines soon."

I've struck a deal with Joel...

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast acquired a new vow. It shall become the wings of rebellion that breaketh thy chains of captivity. With the birth of the Temperance Persona, I have obtained the winds of blessing that shall lead to freedom and new power.

"You okay?" Joel says, waving a hand in front of Clay's face. Clay nods stiffly. That voice sounded vaguely like Caroline's or Justine's, or perhaps even a blend of the two. The Temperance Persona? Some kind of tarot thing like with the Fool, Chariot, Fortune and Lovers?

"That medicine really did a number on you, huh?" Joel says, clicking his tongue. "In any case, I've got a patient that's gonna show up in a couple of minutes, so I'd really appreciate it if you left."

"O-Oh, sorry." Clay stands, wobbling just a little. He bends down and picks up his bag with Floris still inside, and decides to head for Jule Halls.

*

4/21 - TUESDAY - EVENING

"Help."

A wallet bounces off Clay's head. Clay spins on the chair, a hand rubbing where he was struck. "What the hell's wrong with you?"

Nick is laying on the ground, flat on his stomach, chucking whatever he has in reach at Clay's direction. "I need help."

"With what? Homework? Ask Floris."

"Excuse me," Floris calls from Clay's bed. "I mean, I'm a fox. I can't exactly do homework now can I?"

"You're only a fox when it's convenient for you," Nick sighs. "Look, if I finish this crossword and

send it in fast enough, I can get a free T-shirt."

"All the more reason I shouldn't help." Clay turns back to his homework.

"I'll share it with you."

"Ew."

An eraser smacks Clay on the nape of his neck, tumbling down into the folds of his hoodie. Clay fumbles for it, then tosses it back at Nick. A thud resounds as it whacks Nick's skull.

"Children," Floris mutters.

Clay ends up helping Nick with both the crossword and his homework.

*

Chapter End Notes

Temperance Arcana (SmallishBeans) rank 0 -> 1, Guts +1, Knowledge + 2

Elytra, the Electric Town

Chapter Summary

F1NN5TER's sister appears + laptop run at electric town

Chapter Notes

Ruby works at the convenience store too

I know Elytra does not mean anything close to electric but i thought the name sounded cool

4/22 - WEDNESDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"Quick, quick!"

"I'm trying," Clay hisses under his breath, flipping the sandwich, trying his hardest to find the bar code on the wrapper. He scans it, placing it with two cans of soft drinks in a Triple Seven plastic bag, handing it over to the irate customer. Floris isn't helping, hanging out by the window and watching him struggle, yelling out useless phrases like "Faster!" and "No offense, but you're kinda slow."

When the wave of customers have died down, Clay manages to catch his breath leaning against the counter. He is on duty with only two other people - another girl about his age and their manager. The next hour is less tiring and Clay is off the clock by the time six p.m. rolls around. He heads into the break room to change out of his garish, pink uniform, with "777" cheaply stitched on the front in large font.

"Today was rather tiring, wasn't it?"

Clay, having emerged from the toilet, looks over at the girl still in her uniform. Her accent is strange. His eyes drop to her nametag. Ruby. He shrugs. "It was my first day."

"It gets better," the girl says, stepping into the toilet after him. Floris hops in from an open window and struts up to him.

"Ready to go?" Floris says, settling into Clay's bag. Clay tosses the bag over his shoulder just as a message pings on his phone, the device buzzing in his pocket.

Nick: Hey, you need to grab a laptop, right?

Nick: Mum's out tonight.

Nick: Let's go to Elytra.

Elytra? Where's that?

Me: What if she comes back halfway through?

The reply is immediate.

Nick: She's meeting up with an associate so she's not coming back tonight. What say you?

"Oh, you're still here?"

Clay lifts his head to find Ruby standing there, dressed in a waitress' outfit with her bag slung across her chest.

"You'd best get going. The nightlife here gets crazy once the sun sets," Ruby says. "Take care not to run into a mugger."

With that, she exits the store through the back door. Clay types back an affirmative to Nick before following Ruby out as well, headed for the train station.

*

4/22 - WEDNESDAY - EVENING

"Here we are," Nick says. "Let's get cracking on that laptop."

Elytra, the Electric Town, is bigger and flashier than Clay thought it would be. He had heard of Fariold's famed Electric Town back in his hometown, but never would he imagine that there would be a giant shopping mall right in the middle of it, covered on all sides and walls with dazzling billboards and blinking lights. In addition to the impressive mall, there are also several strip malls and shophouses, with a couple of flats a few blocks away.

As they walk through the streets, most of the shops are advertising for electronics, such as home appliances, phone accessories, CDs and DVDs, game consoles and even audiobooks and albums, their wares shielded from the elements by clear plastic films. The merchants are noisy, yelling at passers-by to have a look at what they have on sale.

"That's Jeantan, the biggest electronic hub we have here," Nick says. "They sell everything, and at good prices too."

"I'm broke. I'm only here to take a look at the prices so I know how much I have to save for this," Clay says.

"Oh, well, about that," Nick says. "I asked my mum, and she told me she'd fund you, just this once."

"What?" Who knew Mrs Armstrong could be so considerate?

"I mean, I told her that you might need to use the laptop for school purposes, especially for project works and stuff like that," Nick says, scratching his head. "Keep quiet about that game, okay?"

Clay stifles a laugh. "Yeah, sure."

"So, the budget's a thousand-and-five-hundred dollars," Nick says. "Then again, if we're not getting a gaming laptop, just a business one or one for casual use, we shouldn't exceed that amount."

There are many different kinds of laptops on the fifth floor, with brands ranging from Asus to Hewlett-Packard to Dell and Panasonic and even Macbook. Clay takes his time browsing through the laptops, checking the specs and comparing prices, eventually deciding on an Asus laptop. Nick

nods.

"Good choice."

Floris pokes his head out of Clay's bag. "I don't get any of this."

"Of course you don't," Clay says. "It's advanced techie stuff."

"Basically, you're computer nerds."

The laptop that Clay has chosen is meant for business use, so the battery should last a little longer, and it's within their budget, shy of two hundred dollars. They make the purchase and Clay walks out of that store a happy man.

"Hey, wanna eat at that sushi place? I heard it's good," Nick says, gesturing towards a shop featuring their large selection of seafood goodness, even presenting other options like egg, chicken and beef.

"I want meat," Floris says. "Chicken, preferably."

"Yeah, sure, there's chicken," Clay says, eyes already scanning the numerous pictures of sushi plastered on their walls.

*

4/22 - WEDNESDAY - NIGHT

Darryl: The calling cards're ready.

Darryl: Image.png

Darryl: What do yall think?

"It's actually pretty good," Floris says. "Tell him that."

Me: Floris says it looks good.

Nick: How many did you make?

Darryl: About...ten? Or twenty? I'm not sure.

"We can meet Darryl a little earlier, I guess," Nick says. "Let's reach by six. We don't wanna get caught putting those up."

Nick: Meet at six? School gates.

Darryl: Okay.

"Right then," Floris says. "It's settled."

"Yeah," Nick says, cracking his knuckles. "I'm already prepared to beat his ass."

"That's good then," Floris says. "You guys should get a good night's sleep, because you'll be needing that strength in case something unexpected crops up tomorrow."

Clay stares up at the ceiling, fully aware of the toy dagger and pistol hidden under his pillow and mattress. Tomorrow, they're going to perform their first, and perhaps last, heist. All to save their

schoolmates from Krones' tyranny.

They *have* to do this. By hook or by crook.

Castle of Lust: Life Will Change

Chapter Summary

Stealing Krones' treasure, but something unexpected happens

Chapter Notes

WARNING: Cross-dressing male character

my fav soundtracks in this game featured in this chap (and other subsequent life will change chaps)

this chap took a little longer since i actually revised the fight scene because while the length is all and good for a JRPG it's NOT for a fic (AND I WAS ACTUALLY STUDYING FOR ONCE)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

4/23 - THURSDAY - LUNCHTIME

"Who put these up here?"

Krones' furious roar can be heard from the group's spot near the staircase, a fair distance from the bulletin board where most of their cards are concentrated at, the one people see right as they step into school. "Is it you? Or you?"

Students flee in fear as Krones rampages, losing his nice-guy facade.

Nick squints at a card tacked onto the bulletin board they're standing beside. The letters are individually cut out from newspaper and magazine clippings, colourful pieces and strips of paper dotting the red-and-black cards.

"To Peter Krones, the sinner of lust. You have terrorized the student body for far too long. As the Phantom Thieves of Hearts, we will steal those distorted desires of yours and force you to confess your sins with your own mouth," Nick reads. "The logo is kinda amateurish, though."

"Better than anything you could have designed," Darryl shoots back. Clay chuckles. Watching Krones lose his temper like that, from a safe distance, at least, is pretty entertaining.

"Well, we'd better leave before we get suspected," Floris says. "Come on."

Darryl and Nick walk ahead, bickering about something as trivial as the logo that Darryl drew. Clay glances back once more at the seething Krones, and just for a second, he can see the fusion of King Krones and the real Peter Krones.

And King Krones seems to be staring right back at him.

Clay blinks, and everything returns to normal.

It's time to execute their plan.

*

4/23 - THURSDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"The security level's so high I can even feel it from here," Fundy muses. They have run around the castle, till they're standing right below the safe room nearest the throne room, and the treasure vault where the Treasure is supposed to appear.

"Ender Pearls out," Dream says. He winds up, as if throwing a baseball, and hurls the Ender Pearl at an arc, as high as possible, against the castle wall. The moment the Pearl cracks, Dream is suspended in midair, immediately free falling had he not activated his grappling hook fast enough, the hook catching the sill of the window. The wire contracts, pulling Dream up, air rushing against his face, hood flying behind him. He jumps through the window, landing on the carpeted hallway.

The hallway is empty. A little *too* empty. It's almost scary.

Still, that means it's good, right? Perhaps Krones expected them to invade from the front door (which is honestly kind of stupid).

Behind him, Fundy, Sapnap and Bad appear through the window.

"Let's go," Dream says, running up to the throne room and finding the doors open with no one inside. That's strange...

Nevertheless, that's good for them. While the King's away from his throne, they'd just swoop in, grab the materialized treasure, and disappear like a phantom, like they've never been there.

The treasure vault is open, just like the first time they came by. Instead of housing only coins, jewels and gold, a crown studded with diamonds, rimmed with gold, floats at eye level. Dream approaches it, tapping the crown once or twice and checking for traps. When he is satisfied that there are none, he closes his fingers around it and pulls it into his arms. The crown weighs like a stone in his hands, representative of Krones' perverted desires.

"I knew you could do it," Fundy says, grinning.

Fundy trusts us a little more...

Now they've just got to get out of here with the Treasure.

"The coast is still clear," Sapnap shouts. "Let's go!"

Dream tucks the crown under his arm and they start sprinting as fast as their legs can carry them.

They barely make it past the throne when the sharp sound of a smack echoes through the room, and a volleyball slams into Dream's arm. Dream winces, struggling to hold tight, but the damage has been done.

The crown tumbles to the ground, clinking against the tiles as King Krones picks it up, placing it on top of his head. The cognitive Prince Darryl appears again, this time dressed in the same skimpy briefs that he had been in when they last saw him. He sidles up to Shadow Krones, swooning over him like Krones is the best thing that ever happened to the earth.

Dream clenches a fist.

"I thought you'd be here, you rats," Krones says. "You fell right into my trap!"

Without giving them any time to respond, Krones slams a fist into cognitive Darryl, the cognition exploding into a cloud of ash. A raging black fire engulfs Krones, and he laughs maniacally as the fire begins to grow and grow, sizzling and burning everything in its path, licking at the chandelier dangling above.

"Watch out," Fundy shouts.

"I'll teach you brats!" Krones voice is much more nasally this time. Pink, wrinkled skin emerges from the fire, sickly thin claws curled around a wine glass filled with the lower half of human bodies writhing about, like ingredients in a goblet of wine. The sheen of the crown reflects the sudden shine of the chandelier. Two large eyes bulge from Shadow Krones head as they roll around loosely in their sockets. He must be as tall as...at least three Dreams! "I'll teach you brats not to mess with me!"

"Bad!"

Sapnap reacts the fastest, grabbing Bad by the robes and throwing the both of them out of the way as Shadow Krones' abnormally long tongue slices the ground where Bad was standing. Both tumble and collapse in a heap. Dream unsheathes his dagger and Fundy his saber.

Dream summons Obariyon, an orange gremlin glowing behind him, channeling its power into his pistol. Shots ring out in the throne room, piercing holes in Krones' skin. Krones cackles loudly as his tongue swipes at them again, digging a jagged ravine into the ground. He hardly seemed fazed!

"Captain Kidd!" Sapnap summons his Persona, Kidd firing off several cannonballs from its arm, each of which embed themselves in Krones' body. Krones merely plucks them out of his flesh and continues his assault.

"Come to me, you slaves!"

Shadows appear from nowhere, cognitive beings representing those of the volleyball team, shooting a sudden burst of volleyballs haphazardly all around the room. A ball strikes Dream on the shin, and pain tears through his body as he crumples to the ground. A ball slams hard into his shoulder, sending another shot of pain up to his neck.

"Dream, are you okay?" Bad shows up in all his fiery glory, resting a hand on Dream's shoulder, warmth flowing through him, mending his leg and relocating his arm.

Dream grimaces. Sapnap and Fundy appear to be doing fine, darting left and right and avoiding Shadow Krones' attacks so he needn't worry... Fundy summons Zorro, whipping up a giant cyclone that uproots everything in its path. Debris swirl at mach speeds, along with the cognitive slaves. The slaves scream in pure agony as they vanish into thin air, as ash blown away by the tornado. Shadow Krones tips the wine glass against his mouth, chewing on the human bodies before spitting them back.

The effect is immediate. His wounds instantly heal, those bullet wounds that punctured his skin knitting themselves back together like they never existed.

"What the hell?" Sapnap shouts.

"The glass! We have to break his glass!" Fundy cries. "Zorro!"

This time, Fundy's storm is accompanied by Sapnap's lightning, a whirlwind of crackling electricity which does not miss the wine glass.

"Carmen!" Bad throws out his hands, a massive fireball shot from his palms straight at the concoction of wind and sparks.

"No, no! What are you doing?" Krones shrieks.

The fireball meets the deadly mix, and the wine glass of bodies explodes on impact. Krones yelps, toppling to the ground. On cue, the group bring out their guns, barrels aimed at Krones.

"You don't got me!" Krones yells. "You haven't got me yet!"

"Take it away!" Fundy shouts. "Now!"

Bullets riddle Krones' body as Krones screams, floundering wildly, knocking Sapnap's shotgun from his grip. The shotgun flies through the air and clatters onto the ground. The moment Sapnap makes a run for it is the moment Krones strikes.

"Cheng, come here you useless girl!"

A cognitive version of Yao Yi dressed in her jersey jostles past them, a volleyball in her hands.

"What is he planning?" Dream wonders aloud the same moment Fundy cries, "Get away from him!"

"Taste my gold medal spike! Set for me, Cheng!"

Wordlessly, Yao Yi tosses the ball into the air, which Krones spikes in Sapnap's direction. Sapnap looks up just a tad too late, the ball merely inches from his face.

"SAPNAP!"

The volleyball goes up in flames, burning to a crisp a hair's breadth from Sapnap's nose. Sapnap can only stare at the amazing sight, flames dancing high into the sky, till the volleyball is nothing but cinders raining to the ground. Wasting no time, he snatches his gun and stuffs it back into its holster strapped to his back. Bad's chest heaves, sinking to one knee, having spent most of his energy on that one spell.

"I'm not...letting you...hurt my friends again," Bad hisses, and it is then that Dream sees the scariest look on Bad's face ever, lips pulled back in a snarl, eyes glimmering with nothing but fury and loathing.

"See how useless you are, Cheng? Get outta here!" Krones hisses, his tongue slamming on the ground, the generated tremors nearly knocking Dream off his feet. "Come, Adrian!"

As soon as cognitive Yao Yi blinks out of existence, cognitive Adrian takes her place, clad in what appears to be a bra and panties, dotted with strawberries, also holding a volleyball between his palms. He's going to repeat that attack again, and Dream isn't certain they can stop it this time. They have two options. Defeat Shadow Krones, or defeat cognitive Adrian.

"Bad-" Dream starts, only to see Bad firing off yet another slew of fireballs at cognitive Adrian, the fireballs punching holes into him, gutting him completely. Sweat drips from Dream's forehead as

he watches Bad tear into the cognition, leaving him even more breathless than before. Cognitive Adrian screams, wails and begs for his life, dropping the volleyball which rolls out of sight, flailing and trying to bat away the flames only to be reduced to a cloud of ash, just like the Shadows that came before him.

At the end of the barrage, Bad topples with a thump, unconscious from using all that power in such a short span of time.

"Bad!" Fundy rushes over, healing magic at the ready.

Sapnap taps Dream's shoulder, and Dream runs after him, summoning Obariyon once more. Captain Kidd has already manifested, grabbing Shadow Krones' tongue the next time it lashes out, dragging him along the ground and slamming Shadow Krones into the wall. The crown on his head flies off his head. Dream makes a leap for it, only to be swatted away by Krones' gnarled fingers closing in around the crown and slapping it back onto his head.

"That crown must be the source of his power," Fundy says, returning to the fight and leaping up onto Dream's shoulder. "We gotta get rid of it somehow."

Shadow Krones continues to thrash about, punching the walls, kicking the ground, in a frenzied childish tantrum.

"Sapnap, you shoot the crown off his head," Dream says. "Fundy, you're with me. Diversion. Now." A piece of debris sails right by Dream's head. Dream watches it crash into the ground. That thing almost beheaded him...

"Go!" Sapnap shrieks the next moment something else lands right by their feet, spraying dust up into their faces. The trio take off in opposite directions, with Dream and Fundy running over to the balcony, bombarding Shadow Krones with a dance of ice and wind, long thin icicles spearing Krones, cutting gashes into him, as they spiral carelessly.

Fundy yelps as Shadow Krones' tongue swipes at them, slamming his tiny body into the wall with a resounding crash.

"You *bastard*!" Sapnap's voice resonates even louder, bouncing off the walls. Shadow Krones glances up too late, only to be met with a barrel to the face as Sapnap stands on a pillar, shadow looming over him. "We're taking your fucking Treasure."

A shot explodes, ringing in Dream's ears, as the bullet grazes Shadow Krones' head, the crown flying off his head and towards the balcony. The crown slams into a flash of orange. Fundy screeches as he rolls to safety, body curled firmly around the crown.

"W-When did you-" The fight seems to have left Shadow Krones. His eyes are dimmer, his movements less erratic. He just seems...defeated. Subdued.

"Give it up, Krones," Sapnap says, leaping from the pillar, the shotgun aimed at his face. Dream and Fundy surround him on the other sides, pistol cocked, slingshot drawn.

"No," Shadow Krones shakes his head. "I refuse..." His tone is weaker, his words are softer.

"Then be the dirt I walk on." Sapnap leers at him. "Oh wait. I forgot. You already are."

Another shot pierces Dream's eardrums, and Shadow Krones falls before his eyes, a bullet hole right through his skull. He shoves his pistol back into its holster, and watches as Shadow Krones lets out an otherworldly scream, before he begins to melt, forming once more the human-like

Shadow Krones, that cape wrapped around him, his slumped posture a sign of their victory.

"Well, I guess that'll teach him a lesson," Fundy says. He tosses the crown to Dream, and runs over to Bad, who seems to be waking up from unconsciousness.

"Come on, let's get out of here," Dream says, eyes widening when he sees Sapnap standing over Shadow Krones, the shotgun still aimed at his forehead, with Shadow Krones pleading and blubbering, tears streaming down his face.

"I-I give up! Please, let me go! Please..." Shadow Krones hiccups, having fallen down on his knees, face angled at the ground.

Sapnap doesn't move, his teeth still gritted, veins still bulging from his temple, his finger on the trigger.

Dream grabs his arm. The shotgun fires at the ground, right beside Shadow Krones, who flinches and curls into a fetal position. Sapnap glares at him.

"You wanna let this guy live? Seriously? After all he's done to-"

"I think," Dream says, voice low, "what a better punishment would be is to let him atone. Let him feel guilty for what he did for the rest of his life."

There is a moment of silence, save for Sapnap's laboured breathing. Eventually, he slots the shotgun back into its holster. Fundy and Bad run over to them, Bad still nursing an injured arm.

"You want me to go back, right?" Shadow Krones asks, voice cracked. "And...and atone. I will go back to my real self and-" His Shadow form bursts into a million blue butterflies, spiraling out of the window towards the blood-red sky.

That's that. Shadow Krones is no more, and the crown is still within their grasp, which Dream tucks under his coat.

The first sign that something is wrong is when a piece of debris lands where Shadow Krones had been sitting. Looking up, Dream realizes, with horror, that the ceiling is losing its integrity, pieces small and large descending from above. They're going to get crushed if they don't start moving soon!

"Run!" Fundy shouts. "Run like your lives depend on it!"

"Our lives *do* depend on it!" Bad yells back.

Like the ghostly Phantom Thieves they are, they begin sprinting through the collapsing hallways, dodging pieces of chandelier and walls and debris and whatever else that could possibly rain down on them.

"OH SHIT!" Dream shrieks as his foot no longer touch solid ground but rather slice through thin air. His stomach drops low against his gut, as the four of them begin plummeting to their apparent doom.

*

4/23 - THURSDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"Holy...fucking...shit."

"Lang...Language."

Nick is slumped against the school gate, with Dream and Bad standing over him, catching their breaths as well. Fundy has transformed back into his foxy form.

"That went well, didn't it?" Floris says. "We're all safe and good."

"Speaking of which," Nick says. "Where's the crown?"

Clay fumbles about under his hoodie, fingers digging a flat piece of metal from under the folds. Instead of a crown, he's holding onto a medal. An Olympic medal, with 'Peter Krones' carved onto the back.

"Wait, that's it?" Darryl looks at it, the medal sparkling in the sun.

"Yeah. This must have been the root of his twisted desires," Floris says. "It looks...really...shiny." There is a strange expression on his face. "Can I touch it?"

Well, that has to be the worst mistake in Clay's life, because the moment Floris has got his jaws on it, he's not letting go. Clay has to pry the medal from between his "cold dead jaws" if he wants it back. Sighing, Nick picks Floris up roughly by the neck and shoves him into Clay's bag. There are several students staring at them already, and they don't need anymore rumours going around.

"Let's...grab some dinner. I'm starving," Nick says. "Does Big Bang Burger sound good?"

"You're gonna get fat, you know," Clay says. "And I have trauma from that challenge. Let's go somewhere else."

They've done all they can. Now all that's left is to wait.

Chapter End Notes

i tried. fight scene hard. me tired.

also wanna watch mcc don't wanna wake up at 3am for that

Mimecraft

Chapter Summary

dream begins to play minecraft + kronos does not come to school

Chapter Notes

pls applaud my lack of creativity

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

4/23 - THURSDAY - EVENING

"Hi."

Nick glances up from the computer questioningly.

"We are getting things ready for you."

Nick puts on his headphones. Clay cackles. Floris bats his tail in Clay's face.

"This is why I hate changing laptops," Clay mutters. The setup takes so long and he's basically lost all his files saved on his previous laptop, unless he backed it up onto the Cloud...

"But it should work better, right?" Floris says. "You said your old laptop was falling apart."

"Something like that," Clay nods. He grabs the disc casing of the game that Nick gave him, Mimecraft, from his shelf. An old game that no one really plays anymore, but, well, Clay *could* still give it a try. Once the laptop has finished initiating whatever it needs to initiate, he crams the disc (in pretty mint condition, surprisingly) into the drive and boots up the game.

"What's that?" Floris is staring intently at the screen, as if it's the first time he's seeing it.

"Mimecraft. It's, like, a game where you build and mine stuff," Clay says. "It's all blocks, though."

"Is it now?"

"I'm just gonna call myself Dream," Clay says, scanning through the different options. He's never played this game before... "Oh, there's this public server that I can play on..."

The only other player playing on this server happens to be someone going by the username Phoenix SC, the character's skin a bright yellow, prominent against the blue sky and the emerald grass.

<Phoenix SC> Hey. Never seen you around before.

Clay freezes. That guy is talking to him right? He glances around. Yeah, probably, considering that there aren't any other players around.

<Dream> Just started.

<Phoenix SC> Cool. Want me to teach u?

Teach him? Are people this nice online? Clay expected to get wrecked the moment he spawned.

<Dream> Sure. thanks

The game isn't too hard, honestly. Phoenix SC teaches him how to do the basic stuff - mine blocks of wood, digging down into caverns, fighting zombies and skeletons. It sure is easier than fighting Shadows, though.

<Phoenix SC> Ur quite good at this

<Dream> Thanks

<Phoenix SC> i gotta log off now. hope to see u next time

<Phoenix SC> usually log on at 8

Phoenix SC's avatar disappears from the world, and Clay finds himself alone. He decides to log off as well, shoving his laptop into the laptop bag and onto the shelf. When he glances down at Nick, he's fallen asleep at the computer, screen opened up into a word document, nothing more than several lines typed out. Beside him, Floris is snoring softly, tail curled against his body.

Clay yawns. He crawls down the ladder, shakes Nick awake and guides him to his bed. Nick is asleep when his head hits the pillow. Clay yawns once more, dragging his sluggish body to his bed, and surrenders himself to a deep, deep slumber.

*

4/24 - FRIDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"Hey, it's that delinquent student."

"You think he studies?"

"Not only is he a bully, he's a nerd too?"

Clay ignores the comments, easier to accomplish over the thunderous roar of the rain pattering against the windows. The last one especially. He's not a bully, and he's definitely no nerd. He's cramming these books because he doesn't want to score badly and get kicked out. A sudden realization drops Clay's stomach like a stone into a well.

His future depends on his fucking May exams.

"Hey."

Clay looks down at his feet and finds Floris, a book laid at his feet. Clay has half a mind to wring his neck. How many times has Clay told him to stay in the bag? He does not need everyone to find out that he is bringing a fox to school. He'd get expelled immediately.

"Geez, I was just trying to help," Floris mutters, pawing at the book. "This one looks interesting, amongst all the reference books and everything. Thought you might wanna give it a read."

Floris clambers into Clay's bag as Clay picks the book up from the ground, grateful for the fact that

there are few people in this corner of the library and inspects it. Arsene Lupin, the Gentleman Thief, written by M. Leblanc. Tales of Arsene targeting those who have strayed from the path of righteousness. Interesting. Clay places the book on the table, and continues to scrawl away at his worksheet. He'll just borrow it (with what? His student card?) and maybe take a look at it sometime.

"Hey, have you heard? About Mr Krones."

Clay perks his ears up, pen poised in midair. The two girls sitting at the table behind him are whispering a little too loudly for a library.

"Yeah, they said he called in sick," one of the girls says. "He just...didn't show up."

Clay covers his mouth, hiding a grin.

"I hope he gets better," the other girl says, and Clay has to bite back a snarky response.

They leave soon after that. Clay checks the time. Two more hours till curfew. He should start making his way home as well. Maybe he'll swing by that bread shop he saw at Valentine Hills. The one with a funny name. Clay chuckles to himself as he recalls it. Je Suis Pan. The owner must have lost a bet or something.

"What're you laughing at," Floris mumbles as Clay proceeds to check that book out.

*

4/24 - FRIDAY - EVENING

"Woo!" Nick cries, lounging against the sofa with a bag of corn chips and a saucer of guacamole sauce. The television is showing some kind of zombie show on Netflix. Something Korean. "It's Friday!"

"How was your job?" Clay asks.

"Huh? Oh, it's great," Nick says. "Same old, same old. Come on, watch with me." He pats the space beside him.

The movie wasn't exactly the most interesting film that Clay has watched, but at least he isn't like Nick who shies away from the screen whenever a zombie appears. Good Lord, Clay was expecting to lose an arm with how hard Nick was clutching onto it at the last, climatic scene. Even Floris was sniggering at them.

"Oh, right, Krones didn't come to school today," Nick says, draped over the other side of the couch when Clay manages to successfully extract him from his arm.

"I heard."

"Oh."

There is silence for a moment.

"You wanna go for a run tomorrow? I need to clear my head."

"You don't look like the type of guy who exercises."

Nick kicks him. Clay yelps in surprise. Floris jumps up, nearly raking him with his claws. Nick

plays with a frayed thread dangling from the couch. "I mean, yeah, I don't *usually* exercise..."

"Then what was that kick for? It hurt!"

"Doesn't mean I don't exercise at all," Nick says loudly. "Look, the whole Krones thing...you think he'll suffer a mental shutdown?"

Ah, the mental shutdowns. The thing that's all over the news recently. People bleeding black ooze from their eyes and mouth, suddenly losing all sense of time and just...collapsing. Brain dead. Clay shivers. The black ooze. He'd seen it once on television before, and now that he thinks about it...it does seem very much like how Shadows transform into their demonic counterparts upon initiation of combat.

Nah, it must be a coincidence.

"Maybe," Clay says, and the word hangs in the air for a long time. "Let's go for that run. Five a.m.?"

"Sure."

"Have fun," Floris says. "Running's not...really my thing. The only running I'm gonna do is in a Palace."

"Suit yourself," Nick says, yawning as he switches the television off. "I'm gonna go to bed early."

Clay looks on as Nick heads up the staircase. Once he disappears from view, all Clay can hear is the sound of footsteps against wooden flooring. He stares out the window, at the darkness of the night, at the silhouettes of rustling leaves. The wind howls, its ghastly wails permeating the cozy abode.

Maybe it's time for him to get some sleep as well.

*

Chapter End Notes

+3 Guts, +2 Knowledge

Those long days passing by...

Chapter Summary

dream is busy in the weekend

Chapter Notes

just a glimpse into a few of dream's days. honestly, im not sure how interesting these chaps are because like i think theyre a bit boring lol but i kinda want readers to connect with the side characters as well rather than just the main cast, as well as give some time for dream to explore the new city he's moved to.

neil armstrong is an oc just saying

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

4/25 - SATURDAY - EARLY MORNING

"God, you're good," Nick pants, clutching his knees as they stand beside a vending machine. "You know, you kinda remind me of Neil."

"Neil?" Did Clay hear that name before?

"Yeah, my brother," Nick says. He plops down onto a stone bench. Clay fishes a few loose coins and inserts them into the slot, then choosing his drink. The vending machine spits it out with a rattle. He takes a swig, then passes it to Nick. "You know, the one Krones was talking about?"

Clay nods.

"Neil was really good at running," Nick says. "He always said he'd pace me, but then he'd just leave me in the dust." He chuckles, staring up at the sky, dawn just breaking through the clouds. He hands the drink back to Clay.

"You must have had a good relationship with him," Clay says.

"Yeah," Nick says. "We were close." He smiles fondly, and Clay can't help but wonder what the Armstrong family was like, back when Neil was still alive. Were they more cheerful? More warm? Speaking of which, where *did* Mr Armst-

"Alright, let's go," Nick says, massaging his thighs. "That took a lot out of me."

"Weak."

Nick punches Clay's arm. "Shut up."

Clay laughs. Maybe he understands Nick's pain just a little more.

*

4/25 - SATURDAY - DAYTIME

"Thank you so much for coming in today," Ruby says, throwing on her washed-out pink jacket as she prepares to leave. She then squints at him. "Are you doing alright?"

"Yeah, I am," Clay nods. "Doing fine, that is."

He is *not* fine. Not in the slightest. The day had been hectic, dealing with screaming children, unreasonable customers and getting yelled at for not replacing several expired pieces of bread on the shelves. That hadn't even been his fault! It was the fault of the person whose shift was before his!

"You don't look fine," Ruby says. "Make sure you rest up, alright? I have a brother your age and he usually works himself to death. I worry for him sometimes."

"Your brother?" Clay asks.

"Yeah," Ruby says, fidgeting. "We're not, like, rich or anything, so yeah."

She leaves the sentence hanging, then holds a hand out. Clay takes it.

"Ruby," she says. "I guess we'll be seeing each other a lot from now on."

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast acquired a new vow. It shall become the wings of rebellion that breaketh thy chains of captivity. With the birth of the Sun Persona, I have obtained the winds of blessing that shall lead to freedom and new power...

Clay shakes her hand firmly, only now realizing that under that jacket, she's wearing a Starbucks uniform. She waves goodbye and practically prances out the door. Floris shows up right after she leaves, perched on the window sill as Clay packs his uniform into his bag. Clay eyes him.

"What're you smiling about?"

"Nah," Floris says, the smile morphing into a grin. "Just thinking about how dumb you looked in that uniform."

Clay whacks him with the bag.

*

4/25 - SATURDAY - EVENING

Clay's phone buzzes...and buzzes...and continues buzzing. He sighs. No caller-ID, so he can't even begin to guess who it's from. Nick is doing homework, while Floris is just watching him from a corner. It couldn't be Darryl, right?

"Hello-"

"Hey! Inmate!"

There is only one person who would call him inmate with that kind of tone.

"Caroline?" Question is: how did they get his number? Do they even have cell phones?

"Meet us outside the Velvet Room, now!"

Meet them...outside...where again? Doesn't Clay only visit them in his dreams? How...? There is a scuffle on the other end of the line, and Clay breathes an inaudible sigh of relief when he hears Justine's voice.

"Please head to the narrow alley whereby the weapons shop is located," Justine says.

"Immediately."

Clay opens his mouth to reply, but is only met with a dial tone. He sighs again. God, he's been sighing a lot lately. He glances at the time. He has about three hours before curfew. He can probably make it in time.

"I'm going out for a bit," Clay says.

"Oh, see ya," Floris calls. Nick waves. Clay throws on his hoodie and a pair of slacks, grabbing his bag, and heading out the door.

*

["You](#) just wanted...to eat a burger."

Clay cannot remember just how many burgers he's eaten over the past few days. And they were all Big Bang Burger burgers. Okay, maybe he did eat at a McDonald's with Darryl, but that's besides the point. He should start working out more. Get a gym membership or something (if he can afford it, or he'd have to settle with jogging around the neighbourhood).

"Eat a burger?" Justine tilts her head.

"Shut your mouth, inmate! We need to evaluate the...the..." Caroline glances around her, at the various customers who, surprisingly, don't seem to be paying them any mind. Justine and Caroline stick out like a sore thumb, the only silver-haired young girls dressed in blue warden's uniforms in miles. "We need to evaluate the authenticity of this burger!"

"What is there...to authenticate?" Clay whips out his wallet, paying for the two children's meals and a-

"Big Bang Challenge!" Caroline shouts. Clay cringes. The poor cashier looks like she wants to bolt right about now. "Inmate, for the sake for your rehabilitation, you have to take the Big Bang Challenge."

"What?" Clay hisses. "No way."

"You cannot refuse, inmate," Justine says calmly. She turns to the cashier. "We would like him" - she points at Clay - "to take the Big Bang Challenge."

"S-Sure," the cashier says, punching the buttons on the register. "Two children's meals and one Big Bang Challenge?"

"Yes!" Caroline says, stomping her foot. "Get on with it!"

Clay dies a little inside.

They take their seats, and when the food arrives, Clay can only balk at the sheer size of it. It looks even bigger than it did the other time, when Nick had ordered it as takeout.

"Is that the burger for the Big Bang Challenge?" Justine asks, staring at the monstrosity. Clay didn't expect to see it again so soon.

Caroline huffs. "It certainly doesn't live up to its name. It is said to be as big as the cosmos!"

"My, are these your sisters? They sure are feisty," the server girl says with a giggle, returning with Caroline and Justine's children sets, complete with the toy rockets. Which, Clay may add, Caroline takes a shine to immediately, completely forgetting about the giant burger in front of him. The server girl doesn't, however, as she whips out a stopwatch. Wait, there is a time limit associated with this?

"And the challenge begins...now!"

Clay has never stuffed his mouth so fast in his entire life.

By the time he's done, he's achieved the same level of exhaustion that he had after beating Shadow Krones, and he's...just...laying on the table with his head in his arms, questioning his life choices as Caroline suggests taking the same challenge with Justine while the latter is more focused on playing with her toy rocket.

They walk out, with two bags of takeaways for the twins.

"That was not a bad experience," Justine says, smiling.

"Although we were being stared at," Caroline says, and Clay pointedly tries to forget about that incident where she spilled her Pepsi on the ground and screaming rather loudly when it happened. Clay's face burned and he wanted to dig a hole in the ground and bury himself in it. He thanks his lucky stars that he isn't already blacklisted from this joint.

"Anyway, good work, inmate," Caroline says. "Maybe there's hope for you yet."

Clay sighs.

"Maybe we should reward the inmate," Justine says. "Then he would be more willing to fulfill these special tasks of ours."

Caroline rummages through her pockets, then fishes out a crumpled card that she deposits into Clay's hand.

"This is a card."

Clay deadpans, "I know that."

Caroline kicks him in the shin and Clay shrieks in pain, drawing the annoyed gazes of several passers-by. God, that hurt.

"Quiet, inmate," Justine says. "That card contains a special power which you may use to teach your Personas new skills. Use it well."

"So, is this a deal?" Clay says, recovering albeit ever so slowly. He inspects the card. There is a cyan print on it, with borders of a lighter shade of blue.

"Think of it as you will. I only hope that you may show us more of this world that we have grown curious of," Justine says.

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast acquired a new vow. It shall become the wings of rebellion that

breaketh thy chains of captivity. With the birth of the Aeon Persona, I have obtained the winds of blessing that shall lead to freedom and new power...

"That is all for today, inmate," Justine says. "We shall return for now."

"Escort us back, inmate," Caroline huffs, looking very much like a petulant child with that bag of children's meal and that toy rocket.

*

4/26 - SUNDAY - DAYTIME

"Thanks for coming."

Clay looks up where Darryl is setting down plates of pancakes on the table. Nick is studying today, and Clay has accepted Darryl's invitation out to lunch, to a, supposedly, famous cafe known for its pancakes out here in Beatty, a relatively new neighbourhood still under development. However, there are many specialty shops already opened here, at the station square, a few blocks from a sparse collection of flats.

"It's nothing," Clay says.

"Well, dig in."

The meal starts off quiet, since Clay is too busy savouring the pancakes, its fluffiness, the volume, the waterfall of viscous syrup that's surely bad for his health...God, poor Nick. He must not have experienced tasting this rich goodness...The Big Bang Burger is a scam.

"How is it?" Darryl asks.

"Perfect. Delicious. Can't have enough," Clay says, mouth full of pancake. "Wish you'd introduce me to more places like this."

"I know a good muffin place at Valentine Hills. Maybe we should go there next time."

Clay shows him a thumbs-up, and Darryl chuckles. For some reason, the atmosphere seems to take a nosedive, from the way Darryl refuses to look at him, and instead stares at his half-eaten plate of pancakes.

"Oh, uh, I visited Adrian in the hospital," Darryl says, settling down into the straw chair. "I thought you'd like to know."

"How was he?" Clay asks.

"His condition is stable," Darryl says, staring down at his food. "They didn't say whether he'd wake up soon or anything, though..."

"But he's alive," Clay says. "And that's a good thing."

Darryl smiles faintly. "Yeah."

The meal is eaten in silence, save for the clinking of forks and knives against porcelain plates. Clay eyes Darryl as intently yet as subtly as he can. There seem to be more obvious black bags under his eyes, evident against his paler skin.

"As for the bag, I left it beside his bed," Darryl says after they walked out of the cafe. "You think

he'll like it?"

"Naturally," Clay says, nodding. "I mean, it's like, a symbol of your friendship or something."

Darryl beams.

They part ways at the Valentine Hills interchange, and Clay can't help but feel that he is starting to feel closer to Darryl.

*

4/26 - SUNDAY - EVENING

<Phoenix SC> youre back.

Clay has spawned exactly where he left off, in his tiny wooden hut that he built from stringing together random pieces of wood.

<Dream> So I am

<Phoenix SC> youve got cheek

Dream laughs internally.

<Dream> Are there any other players?

Phoenix SC doesn't respond right away. Instead, his avatar is killing some chickens and collecting their meat.

<Phoenix SC> No. hasnt been for a long, long time.

<Dream> I thought the game used to be popular

<Phoenix SC> Keyword used to be

It must have been lonely, playing this game by himself. He's online every night at eight, so that's probably saying something. Phoenix SC throws a couple of cooked meat at him, as well as a diamond sword and a shield.

<Dream> you're good at crafting

<Phoenix SC> Had a dad who used to craft weird stuff

<Phoenix SC> Like lockpicks

Clay isn't entirely sure how crafting expertise in real life translates over to the game, but whatever.

"Lockpicks?" Floris yips, paws on Clay's back as he scrambles up to his head. "Hey, ask him for lessons."

"For what?"

Floris gives him a look. Floris may be a fox, but Clay can tell that that is one hell of an expression of disappointment. "What kind of Phantom Thief doesn't know how to pick locks?"

"Even so, it's weird asking a random stranger online how to craft shit like lockpicks. He'd think I'm a felon!"

"A felon would already know how to pick locks!"

Nick pushes the door open, walking into the room, fresh out of the bath. "What the heck was I hearing about picking locks?"

Clay sighs, fingers flying over the keyboard.

<Dream> weird question but can you teach me?

There is silence for the longest time, as Clay waits with bated breath. Phoenix SC seems to be sizing him up, glancing up and down his avatar, before his reply comes through the chat.

<Phoenix SC> youre a weird kid

<Phoenix SC> sure

"What!" Floris cries, almost falling off Clay's head. Clay makes a swipe for Floris' body. Nick furrows his brows, but decides to play his first-person shooter MMO and ignore the heck out of them. "He actually agreed?"

"Why're *you* so surprised? This was *your* idea!" Clay cries. "Get the hell off my head!"

Phoenix SC does tell him roughly how to fashion a lockpick out of a paperclip and bobby pins.

<Phoenix SC> In exchange tho, i'd like you to play with me. Whenever u can make it.

That's something Clay can do. He responds with affirmative, and he can almost see Phoenix SC smiling through the screen.

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast acquired a new vow. It shall become the wings of rebellion that breaketh thy chains of captivity. With the birth of the Hermit Persona, I have obtained the winds of blessing that shall lead to freedom and new power...

<Phoenix SC> Well then, I'll see you tmr

With that, Phoenix SC's avatar disappears from the screen, leaving Clay once more alone in the world. Clay decides to shut it off, and, after being enveloped in despair when he realizes that he still has homework due tomorrow that he has yet to do, he panics, with an evil Floris leaping onto his pillow and falling asleep on it.

Because Clay is definitely not going to sleep tonight.

Chapter End Notes

Chariot arcana rank 1 -> 2

Sun arcana rank 0 -> 1

Aeon arcana rank 0 -> 1

Hermit arcana rank 0 -> 1

Charm +2 (part-time job)

Proficiency+1 (hermit arcana)

Every Day Days

Chapter Summary

The deadline to the board meeting draws nearer

Clay MAY join a club

Chapter Notes

recently there has been a drop in temperature in my area. its about 24 C here (~75F), which is a significant deviation from our normal 29-30C (84-86F) so IM COLD

WARNING: Mention of needles

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

4/27 - MONDAY - AFTERNOON

"Clubs?"

"Yeah. It's a great opportunity to meet people, isn't it?" Nick says, waving the club signup form in front of his face. They are seated at the cafeteria, currently indulging themselves in terrible cafeteria spaghetti. The meat sauce is too slimy, the noodles are soggy...

"Clubs sound tiring," Floris sniffs.

They had only few clubs back in Clay's old school. Clay eyes the form suspiciously. Indicate your top five choices. Scanning the list, there are only a couple of clubs that Clay is remotely interested in.

"And why would I want to meet new people?" Clay asks.

"'Cause I feel bad," Nick says. "I mean, you look kinda lonely, and, uh...you know, it's weird seeing you talk to a fox all the time, no offense..."

"None ta-" Clay starts, only to be cut off by Floris screaming, "EXCUSE ME! What do you mean by-!"

Clay grabs him by his tail and shoves him into his bag, pretending that nothing has happened despite the thousands of eyes on him. No matter. In time, they will learn to mind their own business...hopefully.

Nick clears his throat. "Anyway. Maybe you should consider it, you know." He glances at the time on his phone. "Crap, classes starting. Let's go."

Clay stuffs the form into his bag and winces when Floris actually bites him, withdrawing his hand at lightning speed. He gobbles up the last of his spaghetti (also at blinding speed), and heads up to

the classroom block.

*

4/27 - MONDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"Oh, you're back."

Joel looks up from his medical records, his legs kicked up on the counter. "So, what're you here for?"

"The clinical trial," Clay says. "That was our deal, right?"

"Right, that," Joel says, nodding. "Come on in."

The examination room, upon entering, smells like mustard. Very much so. It's somewhat overpowering. Clay settles down at his usual seat, and Joel at his. Joel reaches for an orange concoction and shoves it into Clay's hands, watching him expectantly with his pen at the ready.

Clay stares at the mixture. There is no other word to describe this other than "suspicious".

Still, he downs it. In one gulp, no less. The effect comes quicker than he thought. The lights' glare is suddenly too bright, the honking of the cars outside is too loud...The world spins and blurs, and Clay topples off the chair.

When he comes to, he's lying on the mattress, a little out of it, but otherwise, he's feeling more energized than before.

"Well, it kicked in faster this time," Joel says, tapping his pen on the clipboard. "How're you doing? Good?"

"Better than last time."

Joel chuckles. "Great, Mr Guinea Pig. Anyway, I'd need to run some tests on you before I can let you go."

Clay has had his temperature and blood pressure taken, heartbeat checked, and Joel is preparing the needle to withdraw his blood when the door suddenly bursts open and the same plump woman - Rivers - barges in. Joel looks up with an annoyed expression, the first on its kind Clay has seen on this easygoing doctor. Clay glances between them as Rivers and Joel stare each other down.

"Please wait," Joel says in a clipped tone, "in the waiting room. I am still attending to a patient."

"A patient? This boy?" Rivers harrumphs. She turns to Clay. "I'd stay away from this clinic if I were you."

"Why?" Clay asks, feigning innocence.

"Oh, didn't you know?" she asks haughtily. "Joel is known as the Plague."

The Plague? Clay meets her gaze, refusing to back down. "This is my second time seeing him, and I'm healthy. All fine and good."

Rivers narrows her eyes, no doubt taken aback by his confidence. She grits her teeth, then folds her arms. "He has killed a patient before, you know?"

Killed a patient?

"Yes," Rivers says. "He declared the drug ready for use when it wasn't, and the result was death."

Joel reclines against his seat, looking absolutely bored, a reaction that Clay isn't sure he was expecting.

"Are you done scaring my patient, Rivers? If so, I'd like you to leave. Shoo, get outta here," Joel says, swiveling in his chair and turning back to his computer. "And don't come back."

"Why y-" Rivers starts, then titters. "It's fine. I'll be back, and when I do, I will make sure you close down your medical practice. Whether you like it or not."

She slams the door behind her. The silence that envelopes them is...foreboding, to say the least. Neither speak for the longest time. Finally, Joel exhales forcefully through his nostrils, and picks the needle up again, as well as some gauze.

"Okay, take a deep breath."

Clay does as he is told, and he hisses as the needle sinks itself into his flesh, the inner tube filling up with crimson blood. When Joel is done, he wipes the wound with the antibacterial gauze and tapes a couple pieces of cotton onto it.

"Press down on it."

Clay does. Joel keeps the needle away. It's strange, the room being so quiet.

"Did you do it?" Clay asks. "Kill the patient, that is?"

"Do you think I did?" Joel asks, keying some records rapidly into an Excel spreadsheet.

"No."

There is a hint of a smile on Joel's face. "You're naive, but at least you're not gullible."

"So you didn't do it?"

"Who knows? I'm a mysterious man, if you don't already know by now."

Clay smiles. At least Joel seems to be opening up to him a little bit more.

*

[4/27 - MONDAY - EVENING](#)

"Arsene, the shining example of a Phantom Thief..."

"Would you stop that," Clay says, slapping Floris' flank. Floris yelps and kicks his face, snapping his jaws. "Fucking hell, you're a menace."

"Then don't hit me!"

"What else was I supposed to do if you don't shut up? Mind you, it's the tenth time in, like, ten minutes!"

"That's 'cause you're boring," Floris huffs. "Besides, you're gonna become myopic if you keep

reading like that."

"Ah, piece of shit!" Nick screeches. His chair rolls backwards, almost hitting the bed, the words "You Are Dead" flashing on the screen. Clay sighs, dog-ears the page, and puts the book back on the shelf. With all the commotion around, he's never going to get around to reading it.

"Wow, giving up?"

"One day," Clay says, holding up a finger. "One day, I'm gonna finish it. When you're not yipping in my ear and when Nick's not, uh, screaming his heart out." Thank goodness Mrs Armstrong is out of the house today. Meeting with an associate of hers, apparently. For some expensive sushi.

"One day," Floris repeats sarcastically.

Clay hears the sounds of fingers smashing keys again, his unorthodox lullaby to what would be a dreamless sleep.

*

4/28 - TUESDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"Man, you're getting much better at this."

Ruby steps behind the counter, handing Clay a hot cup of coffee. Clay nearly scalds his tongue on it, but boy does it taste good. They're almost off the clock, which is a good thing, because their manager has been especially pissy today, ranting about this and that. Matters are made worse when some random kid spilled milk all over the floor. And Doritos. The same kid somehow managed to tear open a packet of Doritos and poured the whole thing on the ground. The nerve of some people...

"Yeah," Clay says.

"How long's your contract?" Ruby asks.

"Uh, about...two months," Clay says. He had only gone through the entire signing of the contract after he had worked his first day, a contract for two months. He would receive monthly pay of about a thousand dollars, since he's being paid minimum wage.

"I see. That's quite a short time," Ruby says. She looks down at her tattered watch, the strap already fraying at the sides. "Shall we go?"

The break room is as empty as ever. Ruby changes out first, then Clay. This time, she isn't wearing a uniform, but rather what seems to be her own set of clothes - a faded baby blue blouse paired with a white skirt.

"Do you have anything after this?" Ruby asks.

"No, why do you ask?"

"I was wondering whether you'd like to get crepes with me," Ruby says. "Just around the corner."

It's not like Clay's rushing anywhere, so he agrees. The crepe shop she is speaking of lies between the entrance to the station and the alleyway where the weapons shop is located, the door to the Velvet Room shining in all its azure glory. Clay ignores it in favour of buying his chocolate ice cream crepe. They find a bench and settle down, chewing on their crepes.

"It's been a long time since I've eaten this," Ruby says, pure delight on her face as she devours the crepe in record time, wiping her mouth and hands with the provided serviette.

"Busy?" Clay asks.

Ruby nods. "Yeah. Especially since I need to pay rent soon."

"So a lot of tips recently?"

"Uh huh!" Ruby's eyes are practically sparkling. "I mean, at least I've earned enough to treat myself to a crepe now."

Clay bites his lip. He should have offered to pay, at the very least, given Ruby's financial situation. Ruby continues the conversation with some more lighthearted topics, mainly about work, about the various incidents that day (which honestly makes for good conversation but were terrible when he was caught in the middle of it).

The sun is setting by the time Clay leaves. Ruby waves enthusiastically before running to board her train. Clay decides to head straight home.

*

4/28 - TUESDAY - EVENING

"Finally," Clay mutters, arms falling to his sides, book flopping onto the mattress. He's done with the book and he can return it tomorrow.

"Great," Nick says. "Good for you. Oh, by the way, have you finished filling up that form?"

"The club signups?"

"You're actually going to join?" Floris looks stunned.

Clay glares at him. "I'd like to think I am sociable enough."

"Could've fooled me," Floris says, curling up into a ball beside his pillow.

"Anyways, what're you thinking about?" Nick asks. "Do you want my opinion?"

Clay lets the piece of paper flutter down to Nick, who catches it in midair. "Basketball, drama, gardening club...we have a gardening club? You're into gardening?"

Clay stares at the ceiling. "We used to grow vegetables back at home."

"Did you now?" Nick says. "Hey, Floris, help me bring this up to Clay."

"I'm not a mailman."

Floris helps him anyway.

"So, you're gonna submit that tomorrow?"

"Yeah," Clay says, stuffing the paper into his bag and shoving it to the edge of his bed.

"Tomorrow, maybe."

"Speaking of which..." There is a rustle of bedsheets. "The board meeting's in a couple of days."

"We did all we could," Floris says. "Besides, Krones hasn't been coming to school, right?"

"Yeah, he's been taking leave for...what? Since the day after we stole his Treasure," Clay says. "Something's gotta happen by then."

Nick hums, then hops off his bed. "I'm gonna brush my teeth. Turn in early."

Clay has already washed up, so he stays in bed, facing the wall with his duvet thrown over him. Worst comes to worst, he'd be transferred to juvenile hall, or even prison.

"It'll be fine," Floris says, surprisingly comforting coming from him. Clay closes his eyes, surrendering himself to the chirp of the crickets.

*

[4/29 - WEDNESDAY - AFTER SCHOOL](#)

"You're...not looking too good," Clay says.

"I'm not?" Ruby heaves the cardboard box with a grunt and slices the tape open with a penknife. "I'm chipper. Perfectly fine, I-" She coughs, convulsing. Clay leans against the counter, a hand on his hip.

"You should get some rest," Clay says. "You're not going to get any work done li-"

"I'm fine!" Ruby snaps. Clay flinches. She seems to have noticed, then furrows her brows, sighing. "Sorry, didn't mean to shout at you like that."

Fortunately, there is no one else in the store at the moment. Clay waves it off. "It's okay."

"It's not okay," Ruby says. "I'm not...I'm not turning into..." She trails off, and forces a smile. "Let's get these things up on the shelves, shall we?"

When they're done, they've reached the end of their shift, and it's time to head home. Ruby gives him a tight smile, dressed in her waitress outfit, and bolts out the door. Floris sits by the sill, watching her run off, his head tilted inquiringly. Clay shrugs. What was that she was about to say? She's not turning into...?

"What's wrong?" Floris asks.

Clay shakes his head, realizing he's been staring into space. "It's nothing. Let's get going."

On the way home, he can't help but worry about Ruby.

*

[4/29 - WEDNESDAY - EVENING](#)

<Phoenix SC> havent seen you for a while

<Dream> been busy

Their avatars have just narrowly escaped a bunch of skeletons shooting arrows at them, mined a ton of iron and diamond blocks and are now heading up to the surface. They don't talk much today as they run along the shore of the island. Phoenix SC builds a boat and they get in, rowing along the narrow river, past icy mountains and forests.

<Dream> What about you?

They reach a cave, and both of them alight from the boat. Phoenix SC breaks it and picks it up, and the two of them venture into the cave.

<Phoenix SC> Doing great

<Phoenix SC> At least, my daughter is

He has a daughter? Clay thought that he was probably his age. Or slightly older.

<Dream> You have a daughter?

<Phoenix SC> yeah. she's in high school

About Clay's age, then. They continue mining blocks, crafting more pickaxes, mining more blocks, fighting spiders and witches and other things that go bump in the night.

<Dream> I'm in high school too

<Phoenix SC> huh so youre just a kid. must be nice being young

<Phoenix SC> just make sure you dont make stupid mistakes when youre older

Stupid mistakes, hmm?

<Dream> I wont

<Phoenix SC> Right then, let's get on with our lesson for today.

Oh, right, the crafting lesson thing that Clay had completely forgotten about. Today, Phoenix SC teaches him to craft smoke bombs. Clay doesn't pry - his father must have been a weird engineer or something - but is grateful for the lesson. Some of the materials he mentioned is unavailable to Clay (as a high school student), but Floris assures him that he has a special trove of substitutes lying around.

<Phoenix SC> i gotta get going now. see ya next time, kid

Clay smiles, types a goodbye, and Phoenix SC blinks out of existence. Clay logs out and shuts down his laptop as well.

"What do you mean you've got a trove of...substitutes?" Clay asks, placing his laptop on the shelf to charge.

"I mean what I said," Floris says. "I'll let you know about it after the second of May."

Clay purses his lips, but says nothing more.

*

Chapter End Notes

Clay's current social stats:

Guts -> Bold

Knowledge -> Oblivious

Charm -> Existent

Kindness -> Inoffensive

Proficiency -> Bumbling

Temperance arcana rank 1 -> 2

Sun arcana rank 1 -> 2

Kindness +2 (from hanging out with ruby)

Proficiency +3 (from reading book)

Hermit arcana rank 1 -> 2

Proficiency +2 (from learning crafting from Phoenix SC)

Last Few Days of Freedom

Chapter Summary

last few days of the muffintees-minus-george's freedom

Chapter Notes

continues to be cold

finally the exposition is going to get a move on

i actually wonder whether i can finish all the s links by the end of the story sia

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

4/30 - THURSDAY - LUNCHTIME

"Hey, did you hear? There's going to be a school assembly on Saturday."

"Are you serious? *Saturday*?"

Clay gives his classmates an amused glance as he strides over to where Nick is seated at the cafeteria, alongside Darryl who is already slurping up his soup. He places his tray next to Nick's and settles into the seat beside him.

"This sucks," Nick says, eyes glued to his phone as his fingers tap away at the keyboard. "It's the principal's speech again. On Saturday. That kind of start-of-year speech where he just drones on and on and on."

Clay hums. Those are the worst, but at least he can sleep. With his eyes open, that is.

"Isn't Saturday also..." Darryl starts, and Clay nods, letting out a breath.

"It's the stupid board meeting," Nick says. "Guess we'll know whether we're getting expelled on Saturday."

If Clay ever gave off any indication that he is calm, it is all merely a facade. His heart palpitates when he thinks about May the second, his stomach doing somersaults, his brain feeding him all the worst case scenarios that could possibly arise from this altercation. He wonders how Nick and Darryl are feeling now.

"Let's not think about it so much," Darryl says with a nervous chuckle. "It's in two days."

They don't dwell on the topic, instead deciding to talk about homework and the upcoming examinations in roughly two to three weeks.

"Have you started?" Darryl asks. Nick shrugs.

"No point studying if you're just gonna get kicked outta school."

Clay kicks Nick under the table as Darryl droops.

"Sorry," Nick mumbles.

"It's fine, I get it," Darryl says. "I mean, at least Krones is gone, right...? For good, maybe."

Hmm. Clay hadn't really thought of the implications of what they'd done, other than the fact that they just wanted to rid the school of Krones. But to imagine Krones' eyes, ears, nose and mouth oozing that strange gooey black liquid, just falling to the ground like...like a mannequin.

He shivers. The plate of squid ink pasta doesn't seem so appetizing anymore.

Clay is back in his classroom by the time the bell rings, staring out the window, at the magpies soaring freely in the sky.

*

4/30 - THURSDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

Clay steels himself. He's standing outside the classroom beside the Biology labs, meant for the gardening club's use. He can hardly hear a sound from within. He's not that early, so it can't be that there's no one behind that door. Maybe the club is just...full of serious gardeners? Clay may have helped his mother plant, grow and reap a couple of vegetables over the years back in the countryside, but what if he embarrasses himself here?

"Hey, what're you doing?" Floris asks. "Just go on in."

Mustering up all his courage, Clay pushes the door open to find himself in an empty room, save for a girl surrounded by various pots of plants, humming a popular tune to herself. She appears sprightly, from the way she tips the watering can and how she prances around the room. Clay doesn't even recognise half these flowers.

"Oh, you must be the new member," she says, dancing over to him.

"Uh, yeah," Clay dips his head, looking around the room. Is there no one else here?

"Yeah, well, you see, people bail all the time," the girl says. "It's usually just me and the plants."

Oh great. Maybe he should...just...miss club. Just put his name down on the record and pretend he went. Yeah, that ought to do it.

What a model student, Clay.

"What's your name? I'm Niki," the girl says, holding out a hand.

Clay takes it. "Clay."

Niki flashes a toothy smile. "Hope you won't bail. Though, like, seriously." She claps her hands together. "Now, shall we start the tour?"

She proceeds to show Clay around the room. It's not very big, to be honest, but there are pots everywhere, with all manner of plants growing from the dark soil. There are even aquatic plants over in a corner. Money plants grow in decorated pots hung by the window. There is a section of the room, the part that receives the most sunlight, dedicated to cacti and air plants.

"So, as you can see, we grow veggies too. And flowers," Niki says, gesturing to the plethora of colours. "Oh, right, here." She opens up a closet, fishing out a book that looks like it has survived eons. She dusts the cover, a cloud of thick dust sent floating to the ground, and hands it to Clay. "Here you go. This is the Flowerpedia, a book we pass down to our new members to learn more about plants."

"O-Oh thanks," Clay says, trying not to wrinkle his nose at the state of the book. There is a suspicious brown stain at its corner, which Clay makes absolutely sure not to touch. Perhaps he can just stuff it in the bag with Floris can forget all about it.

"Great," Niki says. "Now, maybe for starters, you can help me sprinkle some fertilizer..."

Clay spends the rest of the afternoon helping Niki out. At least, sprinkling water and fertilizer takes his mind off the whole Krones thing. Moreover, he has to applaud Niki for her enthusiasm, having to deal with such an unenthusiastic guy like himself.

"Alright, take care on your way back! Oh, and I need that book back in a week's time, so don't you go forgetting it!"

Clay gives an affirmative answer, the book heavy in his bag. He can hear Floris complaining, but he's too exhausted to care. Well, that was rather taxing on his mental fortitude, having to follow her around like that.

He decides to head to the library. That book on Arsene was interesting, so maybe he'd find another book that will intrigue him like that one did.

*

[4/30 - THURSDAY - EVENING](#)

"What's that?"

Nick whirls around in the chair so fast, Clay thought he'd start spinning. Clay dumps his bag on the ground and Floris hops out. Nick stares down at the stone in his hand. No, it's not a stone. It's a pendant.

"Neil's," Nick says, turning it around in his hand. Its gold coating is covered in rust. "You know, you remind me of him. A lot."

"Yeah, I know."

"Oh," Nick says, tilting his head. "Must have said it before then."

Clay sits on the ground, beside Nick.

"My mum's been getting on my case lately, about how I've been neglecting schoolwork," Nick says. "Honestly, she just wants me to be like my brother, you know. It kinda sucks."

"How so?"

"It's like..." Nick flicks the pendant and it flies into the air. He catches it in the palm of his hand. "It's like you're carrying the weight of two people's expectations on your shoulders, you know."

"She must be taking it hard."

"I am too," Nick snaps, then sighs. "Sorry. I've been a little irritable lately."

"Don't worry about it."

Nick smiles. "You're seriously too nice, you know that? Just like Neil. Maybe that's what got him killed in the first place." Nick shoves the pendant back into the desk drawer. "He shouldn't have been the son who died."

Curiosity burns in Clay's chest along with a chilly sorrow spreading through his middle. It pains him to see his friend like this, yet be unable to help in any way.

"That got depressing fast, huh?" Nick laughs a choked-up laugh. "Sorry, do you mind leaving me alone for a moment?"

Clay watches as Nick turns back to his computer, continuing to type into that Word document he was typing the other time. Clay decides to leave him to it, feeling a little closer to Nick than before.

*

5/1 - FRIDAY - MORNING

"So, there are many words in the English language that has been taken from other languages. One such word is 'wunderkind'," Miss Lee says in a monotonous voice. "Clay, what do you think 'wunderkind' means?"

What? Clay stares at the word circled on the board. What the hell does that mean?

"Don't panic," Floris says. "We've got this. Okay, so wunderkind is made up of two words, right? 'Wunder' and 'kind'. So, the first part means..."

"Wonder."

"And the second part?"

"Uh..." Clay thinks for a bit. "Child?"

"So it's basically wonder-child put together, right? And that means?"

"Prodigy?"

Miss Lee claps her hands. "Indeed. 'Wunderkind', a word of German origin, means a 'prodigy', a 'wonder child'. I didn't expect you to know it, Clay."

"It was all my hard work," Floris grumbles.

"Thanks man," Clay gives him a nice long rub under the chin, and Miss Lee continues on with her lesson.

*

5/1- FRIDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

Clay settles for studying in the library after school, since the board meeting has been weighing heavily on his mind the whole day. He needs to catch up on a written report due in a month's time, but with everything that has been happening after school, he's been falling behind by a ton.

"Hey."

Floris paws at a book, this one depicting a fearless pirate on its cover. Clay picks it up, and Floris hops onto his lap. "It's about Captain William Kidd."

Clay flips to the back, examining the excerpt. "So?"

"Captain Kidd is Sapnap's Persona."

Realization dawns on Clay. "So you think that I'll be more interested in books centered around our Personas."

"It's a start. Considering your minuscule brain..."

"Yeah, I guess I'll borrow it," Clay says, placing it beside his stack of textbooks. Floris curls up on his lap, his body rising and falling with each breath, going rather still.

Homework becomes infinitely harder with a furry animal asleep on your thighs.

Still, Clay thinks he did well.

*

5/1 - FRIDAY - EVENING

"Who're you texting?" Floris asks.

"My boss," Clay says, barely able to hear Floris over the thunderous pattering of rain against the window pane. "There's the assembly thing tomorrow, remember? I gotta get someone to cover my shift."

"Makes sense," Floris says, nodding.

Nick isn't back from the bathroom yet, giving Clay some time to think about things. Or rather, to try not to think about anything. Tomorrow's the board meeting, and tomorrow's the school assembly. If nothing has happened by tomorrow, they're majorly screwed.

"I'm gonna...clean the house."

"You're gonna what?" Floris climbs down the stairs and perches at the bottom, waiting for Clay to slowly clamber down the steps.

"Clean the house."

"No offense, but that doesn't seem like something a teenager would do."

"I'm not just any teenager," Clay says, winking, and Floris pretends to gag. Clay mops the floor, even washing a couple of plates left in the sink for good measure. He is in the middle of drying them when Nick descends the stairs, plopping onto the couch, a towel around his neck, water dripping from his hair.

"You're pretty hardworking."

"Clearing my head. Don't get the wrong idea," Clay says, and Nick chuckles. It's hard to disperse the unease in the air, but damn if Clay isn't trying.

Naturally, Clay cannot sleep that night, no matter how heavy his eyelids are, no matter how tired he is, the butterflies in his stomach, or rather, raging moths, disallow him from sinking into slumber.

Clay blinks, and the alarm clock begins to ring.

Chapter End Notes

summary of dream's days:

Chariot rank 2 -> 3

Knowledge +2 (for answering a question correctly)

Knowledge +2 (studying in library)

Guts +2 (studying in the library)

A School Assembly to Remember

Chapter Summary

Confession of sins

Chapter Notes

i should learn from this. maybe spread out the palace exploration days more (definitely will happen since now theyve got clubs and part time jobs and all that) and not just. cram all the exploration days together and leave the boring s link stuff at the end.

been trying to withhold as much stuff as possible (*cough cough* darts and billiards...mementos...*cough cough*)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

5/2 - SATURDAY - MORNING

Clay stands behind Darryl at the assembly, tapping his foot impatiently while he waits for the principal to walk onstage. There is chattering amongst the students, mainly wondering why Krones is missing from school for so long, and what the principal could possibly have to talk about on a Saturday of all days. Beside him, Nick is scuffing his shoes against the wooden floor.

The principal eventually comes out from behind the thick burgundy curtains. He taps the microphone twice, then puts his hands behind his back.

"I have something to say to all of yo-" the principal begins, before he is interrupted by the opening of the gymnasium doors. Everyone turns at the sound, and a series of muffled gasps erupts all throughout the student body.

The one who shuffles along the sides of the gym, head hung low, not meeting gazes with anyone, is one Peter Krones. His hair is shaggy, his glasses askew, eyes sunken into their sockets. He doesn't seem to have suffered a mental shutdown. At least that's *something*. He makes his way to the front of the gymnasium and climbs up the steps to the podium, under the watchful eye of every single student and faculty member.

"I...I must confess something," Krones says. "I must confess that...all those rumours were true. The rumours that I had been sexually and physically abusing the students of our school. I...I am so sorry. It" - he breaks off, starting to sob. Big, fat ugly tears rolling down his saggy cheeks - "It is best if I just...please kill me now! I don't deserve to live!"

Even Clay is taken aback by this turn of events. Who knew that Krones would be so dramatic? Is this what they call "a change of heart"?

"No!"

Clay jumps at the sound. The one who yelled is Darryl, a mask of anger on his face. "How dare you run away when it's convenient for you? You have to live. Live and reflect on what you did. Atone for your sins!"

Krones blinks, like he's just had an epiphany. "Y-You're right." He sniffs. "I must turn myself in...confess to everything...Someone!" He shouts desperately. "Someone call the police!"

The assembly is cut short after that as the school is plunged into an uproar, with Darryl, Nick and Clay barely surviving the chaos and ducking out of the gymnasium, deciding to hang out near a toilet hidden behind the stage, its location unknown to most of the school body, according to Nick. Floris pokes his head out from the bag, gulping down fresh air.

"Wow, I didn't expect that to happen," Nick says, folding his arms. "That's definitely better than having him suffer a mental shutdown."

"Well, I guess it's because we didn't kill his Shadow," Floris says. "Maybe if we steal someone's Treasure *and* send their Shadow back to their real selves, it won't end in a mental shutdown."

"They would just confess their sins, and want to atone for what they did," Darryl says.

"Because they are now unable to live with the guilt," Clay finishes.

"Then that's good, ain't it?" Nick says. "He got what's coming to him, and we didn't kill him or anything."

Clay looks up when the gymnasium doors open and students are filing out, on the way back to class. The bell rings overhead and the blare of sirens ring out in the distance.

"I think we should keep a low profile for now," Floris whispers, once more tucking himself between Clay's books. "Let's get to class, everyone, and we'll meet up at the hideout after school."

*

5/2 - SATURDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"Well, here we are."

Nick is the last to arrive. As soon as the trio take their usual spots by the desk, the door opens, and Nick stumbles through, swinging it shut behind him.

"God, Pres was on my tail."

"Pres?" Clay asks.

"He calls himself Eret," Nick grumbles. "Don't know what's his real name, though. Even the teachers call him that."

"I don't really know much about him, though," Darryl says. "Oh." He turns to Clay and Floris. "Eret's the President of the Student Council. To be honest, he's like the guy that everyone knows."

"But he's so mysterious that no one actually knows about him," Nick says.

"Anyway," Floris says, "let's get to the main topic of what I wanna talk about here."

"What is it?" Darryl asks.

"Clay, did you bring the medal?"

It's been sitting in his bag ever since they stole it from his Palace. The medal, that is. Krones' Treasure. Clay fishes it from his bag and lays it on the table with a clink.

"So, is this the real medal? It's hella shiny," Nick says, picking up the medal and inspecting it. "For something that's made of gold, it's pretty light, though."

"Nah, that's a fake medal," Floris says. "Krone still has the real one. Still, wouldn't you say that this would rake in some cash?"

"Still, who'd buy this? It's like, stolen goods," Nick asks.

"That's fine," Floris says. "We know a place that'll buy anything, right?"

Clay blinks. Floris' expression morphs into one of disappointment. He droops for a moment, just a single moment, when he springs back up. "The more important thing here is celebration!"

"Yeah, we totally should," Darryl says. "Speaking of which, there's a place I had been meaning to try with Adrian."

"Knowing your taste, I'm sure it'll be good," Floris says. "Unlike other people I can mention who eat only burgers all day long."

"Excuse me!" Clay cries as Nick smirks. "It's not like I *wanted* to eat them!"

"Alright, but it's a little expensive," Darryl says. "How much do you think we can get that medal for?"

"Eh, we'll get back to you on that," Floris says. "Let's go and exch-"

The door opens, creaking on its hinges, and Floris dives into Clay's bag, staying as motionless as possible. Clay glances up to see a tall boy walking towards them, dressed impeccably in the Enderlands High uniform with nary a crinkle in sight. He approaches them and folds his arms, glancing from Nick, to Clay, to Darryl.

"Interesting," the boy says. "The delinquent transfer student, the boy with the controlling mother, and Krones' boyfriend."

"Shut up," Nick says. "What do you want?"

Amusement lights up the boy's face. "I want you three to get off the rooftop, for starters. It's dangerous up here."

Clay wants to scoff. He stands, meeting the boy's eyes for just an instant, then heads silently towards the exit, followed by Nick and Darryl. There's no point making a fuss about it, not when Clay is still on probation.

They promise to exchange the medal on Monday (because Clay arranged for a shift tomorrow at the convenience store), and they can hold their celebration on Tuesday.

They part ways at the train station.

*

"Who was that?" Clay asks, leafing through his book. The one on Captain Kidd.

Nick looks up from his computer, pulling out an earbud. "Who was who?"

"That guy who chased us off the rooftop," Clay says, turning onto his side, a finger between the pages.

"He was awfully rude," Floris comments.

"Oh, him," Nick swivels back to his chair. "That was Eret. The guy who was on my tail."

"The Student Council President?"

"He's annoying, to be honest," Nick says. "Like he's the principal's pet. Basically a snitch. People say he's doing it for the recommendation letters. To college."

"He sounds like he suspects us, though," Floris says. "We'd better be careful of what we say around him. We don't need to stir up any more trouble."

Clay hums, thumbing through another page. Nick sticks the earbud back into his ear.

When Clay is feeling sleepy, he puts the book down back on the shelf and heads to the bathroom to prepare for bed.

*

5/3 - SUNDAY - DAYTIME

Ruby isn't here today.

Instead, Nick is.

"I didn't know you work here," Clay says innocently as they restock shelves.

"Well," Nick says pointedly, "I didn't think you'd choose to work here."

"I thought I would've seen your uniform at some point in time," Clay says.

"Oh, that?" Nick carefully places the Fanta bottles into the freezer. "It's usually in my bag, or it'll be washing at the laundromat. I can't let my mom find out I work."

"Speaking of which, why *do* you work?" Clay asks. "Aren't you guys quite well off?"

"We are, but I need to record all my spending," Nick says, "and return to her whatever I didn't use. If I want anything, like textbooks, I gotta approach her for the money directly. It helps to have my own spending power, though."

"I see," Clay says. He's using the money they've earned from the Metaverse, so he's still good for now. Even so, that money cannot last him the whole year.

"Hey, are you two slacking off over there?" Clay cringes at the manager's shout from the other end of the store. How the fuck does she know...?

"N-No, ma'am!" Nick calls back. He heaves the cardboard boxes up. "Let's get a move on."

*

5/3 - SUNDAY - EVENING

"I'm beat," Clay says.

"No kidding."

Clay is not "beat" from working at the convenience store. No, that provided some sort of relief for the tension that built up during the whole Krones fiasco. Rather, his head is spinning, words swimming before his eyes, as he forces himself to consume the information spread out on the table. Perhaps Clay would not be so pressurized to study if he's surrounded by people who don't. However, his friends include Nick with a controlling mother and Darryl who is just...responsible. Forget Floris.

"Shut up," Clay mutters.

"Not my fault you suck."

Clay sighs and buries his face in his arms. "I give up."

"If you don't pass all your exams, you're going to juvenile hall."

Clay groans. How? How can schoolwork be harder than dungeon crawling, than risking your life fighting Shadows?

Nonetheless, it is. Apparently.

*

5/4 - MONDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"What? This medal?" The owner of the weapons shop runs his fingers around the edges, squinting at it. "It's not a real Olympic medal, that's for sure. Still, I'm sure I can find someone who'd want this." He swings his legs off the counter, bending forward. "I'll give you three hundred bucks."

Clay's eyes bulge. "Three hundred bucks?"

"You heard me," the owner says. He rummages under the counter and produces three wads of ten-dollar bills. "It's in good condition, and from the weight, well, it *feels* like real gold. Granted it's not the actual Olympic medal, but I'd say it's a great replica."

"W-Whoa," Clay stares at the three stacks of dollar bills.

"Yeah," the owner says. "In any case, you might wanna skedaddle out of here, before-"

The door opens with a jingle, and the owner leans back against his seat.

"Hey, Phil."

The voice belongs to a blonde youngster with fair skin, a heavy accent unlike what Clay hears around these parts. He wears a red raglan shirt, complete with ripped jeans and sneakers. He swaggers into the store, hands in his pockets, glaring up at the owner, Phil. Clay figures it's best to get out of here. For now, at least.

"Thanks," Clay says meekly, shoving the money into his bag, ignoring the way Floris yips in surprise.

Clay does not miss the way the boy glared at him, the boy who seems so much younger than him. Probably middle school.

"What're you lookin' at?" the boy snarls.

Phil clicks his tongue. "He's a customer. Tommy, you don't treat customers that way."

"Tch." Tommy settles for glaring at Clay defiantly, and walks over to what appears to be the break room. Is he a part-timer here?

"Well, what're you waiting for?" Phil asks with a grin, tipping his hat. "Get the hell outta here."

Clay does as he is told.

*

5/4 - MONDAY - EVENING

"Three hundred bucks?" Nick all but screams. Clay presses a finger to his lips, shushing him.

"Yeah," Clay says, reaching into his bag and fishing out the three wads, laying them out on the ground.

"Dude. Three hundred bucks...that's a hundred per person! We gotta tell Darryl!"

Nick: Yo! \$300!!!!

Darryl: ?

Me: exchanged the medal

Darryl: !!!!!

Darryl: That's more than enough to cover the cost of the restaurant

Darryl: I've already made reservations for this Friday. You're all free, right?

Me: Yup

Nick: Where is it?

Darryl: The buffet at Wilton Hotel. They have good muffins :)

Darryl: And many others!

Darryl: It's \$80 per person, so we'd still have \$20 each

Nick: Gr8

Clay cannot stop the wide grin blooming on his face, fingers tapping against his phone as he thinks about the upcoming celebration. A buffet! Unlimited food for eighty dollars per person. Moreover, the entire cost is covered by Kronos' Treasure!

"We have another long day ahead of us tomorrow," Floris says. "We should get some sleep. Let the celebration be your motivation for the next few days."

Clay has to agree.

Chapter End Notes

Charm +3 (working at the convenience store)

Knowledge+3 (studying with Nick)

Busy Busy

Chapter Summary

Ruby opens up + 2 new vows formed + friday is approaching

Chapter Notes

midterms starts today yay

idk the first thing about gardening. everything i touch dies

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

5/5 - TUESDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"Ah, Clay."

Ruby's face looks weathered, her haggard appearance emphasized by her disheveled hair and unkempt uniform. She is manning the counter when he enters, bloodshot eyes greeting him.

"Are you okay?" Clay asks, walking up to the other counter and servicing a customer, ringing up her purchase.

"I'm fine," Ruby says, suppressing a yawn. When the crowd begins to thin, Clay begins to study her a little more closely. Those bags under her eyes are even more prominent now. Her arms are thinner and she's lost the skip in her step when she heads over to shelves to refill them. All the while, she is coughing into her hand. Halfway through stocking the shelves of milk cartons, Ruby stumbles.

Clay grabs her arm, steadying her, stunned at the heat radiating off her skin. Ruby snatches her arm back.

"You're having a fever," Clay says as a matter-of-factly.

"I'm not."

"You are," Clay says sternly. "You shouldn't be working."

"I have to!" Ruby's voice cracks strangely at the end. "I need the money."

Thankfully, the store is empty right now and their manager is absent, or else both of them would be in trouble.

"I'll handle the rest," Clay says. "You should rest."

Ruby looks like she wants to argue, but doesn't fight it when Clay gently removes the milk carton from her trembling fingers and leads her towards the break room. She settles down on the couch,

eyes rimmed red, lip wobbling, but vehemently refuses to cry. Clay has to applaud her strength. He heads out and tends to the last few customers before the end of his shift. He heads into the break room, where Ruby seems to have fallen asleep, head lolling back against the couch. The person who is supposed to take over is in the changing room, judging from the unattended bag (that belongs to neither of them) and the rustling of clothes in the room.

Clay nudges Ruby's shoulder. She jerks awake and, not-so-discreetly, scoots away from him.

"Sorry about that," Ruby says, wrapping her arms around herself, her gaze on the ground. "I guess you're right. I do have a fever. But I had to come. I need the money."

"But even so, you shouldn't come to work at the expense of your health," Clay says.

Ruby smiles grimly. "Easy for you to say."

"If you've got the time, you should come to Joel's Clinic," Clay says. "In Jule Halls. Just mention my name."

"Joel's Clinic?" Ruby laughs. "That's so original."

At least she's smiling genuinely now. "I'll be sure to let him know."

They part ways at the train station, with Clay heading straight home.

*

[5/5 - TUESDAY - EVENING](#)

"I wish Friday would come sooner," Nick complains.

"So do I," Clay says, sighing. "So do I."

"Careless mistake," Floris says, shifting his paw over the paper. "You missed out your negative sign."

Clay stares at the spot that Floris is pointing at. "You gotta be kidding me. How can a fox do math better than I can?"

"I'm not a fox!" Floris cries. "I'm a human!"

"A human," Nick grunts, "does not tread dirt onto the table." Floris pretends not to notice the prominent brown paw print on the glass tabletop. Nick wipes it up with a tissue paper, scrubbing against the glass till it can barely be seen.

"Hey," Nick says. "You know Krones? That confession onstage? It's getting a lot of media coverage. Apparently, many students got the courage to talk about the abuse he's been inflicting on them. Kinda makes you think you've made an impact; you helped all these people's lives, you know?"

Clay leans back against his chair, twirling the pen between his fingers. "Yeah."

"It's like we're finally making a name for ourselves." Nick grins, putting his phone down. "So, let's, uh, continue studying. A Phantom Thief can't have bad grades, right?"

Clay isn't so sure he agrees. Oh well, at least Clay can claim it is a tad more productive than studying by himself...

"Wait, I didn't get the prize for that last crossword," Nick suddenly says, digging a magazine out from his bag. "Help me with this one first."

Or not.

*

5/6 - WEDNESDAY - EVENING

Ruby didn't turn up to work again that afternoon, Clay muses as he sits at the couch, waiting for Nick to return with another bowl of corn chips.

"You're gonna get fat," Floris says, curled up between the both of them.

"Oh shut it," Nick says, and Clay starts the movie.

Mr Beast and Monsieur Bacteria isn't a blockbuster by any means. If anything, it seems more like what they'd show as a children's television show. A story about kindness, about compassion, how Mr Beast overpowers Monsieur Bacteria and saves the world...

Clay silently congratulates himself for managing to reach the end of the movie when the credits start to roll. Nick is already snoring with his head tilted back, Floris snuggled into his lap. Clay grins, snapping a shot with his phone. Blackmail material doesn't come easy.

He switches the television off and shakes them both awake.

Well, that's another day gone. Friday, here he comes.

*

5/7 - THURSDAY - MORNING

"Using your phone in class, I see!"

Clay winces as the chalk hits his forehead straight on. Who the hell is this guy? A professional marksman? The chalk bounces to the ground, and Darryl (that *traitor*) actually smirks when he returns it to the teacher.

It's not like Clay was secretly complaining about examinations or anything.

"Don't lie to yourself, cretin," Floris yips from underneath the table.

Clay feels like strangling the fox with his own bare hands.

"Perhaps you'd like to answer this question!" the teacher (Clay can't even remember his name) says, tapping the chalk on the board. "What does femme fatale translate to literally?"

"Uh..." Clay catches Darryl mouthing discreetly out of the corner of his eye. "Uh...fatal woman?"

The teacher harrumphs, and Clay relaxes triumphantly, choosing to return to staring out the window.

Well, now he and Darryl are even.

*

5/7 - THURSDAY - LUNCHTIME

"Hey."

Yao Yi walks up to Clay just as lesson ends, her hands behind her back. Clay tilts his head questioningly.

"I...I thought you might like to know, but...here!" Yao Yi holds out her phone, shoving her screen into Clay's face. Clay instantly recognizes the interface. The background is a jarring black-and-red, though the words are white, similar to how Darryl fashioned their calling card. Darryl had discovered it and sent them a screenshot. It had said Phantom Aficionado Website, or Phan-Site for short.

"I...I made this," Yao Yi says. "I may not look it but I'm good with computers. You guys are the Phantom Thieves, right?"

The widening of Clay's eyes may have given him away, but Yao Yi merely chuckles.

"Don't worry, I don't intend on publicizing that fact," she says, stuffing her phone back into her pocket. "But you guys inspired me, you know. Saving those who can't help themselves...so I decided!" She shows him a peace sign. "I'm gonna help you guys by being your image manager! How about that?"

She gives Clay a crash course on the website, effectively cornering him (since he sits at the desk to the wall). The website has two pages at the moment: a forum to post requests for people who have problems that they want the Phantom Thieves to help them solve, and the other is a poll, the question being: Do you believe in the Phantom Thieves?

Clay has to admit, with the numbers being at 4%, the poll really demoralizes him.

"I hope we can work well together, Clay," Yao Yi says, bowing. "And I...I really appreciate all you did." For some reason, it feels like Clay has forged a new bond.

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast acquired a new vow. It shall become the wings of rebellion that breaketh thy chains of captivity. With the birth of the Moon Persona, I have obtained the winds of blessings that shall lead to freedom and new power...

"I guess I'll see you tomorrow! Bye!"

Yao Yi waves, and she leaves the classroom.

As soon as she is gone, Darryl and Nick walk up to him.

"Sorry, we couldn't help but eavesdrop," Darryl says, sounding genuinely apologetic. "But still, what was that all about?"

"Some...Phantom Aficionado Website," Clay says. He packs his bag, almost stabbing Floris with a book, and stands. "Let's go."

A Phantom Aficionado Website, hmm? This ought to be worth checking out.

*

5/7 - THURSDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"Here."

Clay is glad to get that ripped book emanating that terrible stench from his bag. Goodness, he'd probably have to send it for dry cleaning or something, from the way the smell has permeated the fibres of his bag. Niki, on the other hand, seems to be delighted to receive that...that abomination, though the only thing she does with it is to shove it back where it belongs - in a drawer in a corner of the room. Never to be seen, smelled or touched ever again. Good riddance, Clay says.

Clay looks around. True to her word, only Niki and himself are here again today. Niki doesn't seem to mind the silence, filling it up with her own brand of humming as she moves to water the plants - two pots of climbers on sticks - and instructing Clay to care for the cacti.

"I'm kinda shocked you came, actually," Niki says. "Thought you'd be just like the rest."

Clay shrugs. "I like gardening." Not a complete lie. He's impartial, but she doesn't need to know that.

Niki giggles. "Interesting. Tell you what, how about I let you bring some veggies back home? You know, to cook and stuff like that. In exchange, you continue coming to club."

Clay nods, holding out his hand. Vegetables, especially those as succulent as these, may aid in their Palace forays. Niki shakes on it.

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast acquired a new vow. It shall become the wings of rebellion that breaketh thy chains of captivity. With the birth of the Hanged Man Persona, I have obtained the winds of blessings that shall lead to freedom and new power...

"Right then, guess I'll see you next Thursday," Niki says, waving to Clay as he exits the club room. As he does, however, he vaguely hears the sound of a peppy ringtone chirping from inside the room.

*

5/7 - THURSDAY - EVENING

Clay's arms fall to his side, as does that book on Captain Kidd. He finally finished the last few pages. Nick is still studying (thank goodness he didn't ask Clay to study with him or Clay would positively *die*). Floris is already fast asleep, having said something about wanting to get some good night's rest for the celebration they're going to have tomorrow.

Clay whips out his phone, searching for the Phan-Site that Yao Yi created on their behalf. Already, there are a multitude of posts (though the poll results remain at an all-time low), detailing people's life problems. However, most of them

Except one.

This one appears to be posted by a woman being stalked by her previous lover, whom she dumped. He would wait outside her company building, follow her home, and even the police are unresponsive when she applied for a restraining order.

"It's bright..."

Floris rubs a paw against his eye.

"What the hell? Oh, is that-?" Floris squirms beneath Clay's arms and lays on his back, staring up at the phone. "The Phan-Site?"

"Yeah," Clay says. "Do these people have a Palace, though?" The woman only posted the man's full name, with no clue as to the venue or any possible distortion.

"Nah," Floris says, rolling back onto his stomach, whiskers tickling Clay's cheek. "You remember how I said there was a treasure trove of materials that we can use to make what Phoenix SC taught us?"

"Uh huh?"

"Well, we can make use of that place," Floris says. "I'll tell you guys more on...uh...Monday. When you're all free."

"Sure."

Clay shuts his phone off and plugs it into the charger. Floris dozes off soon after, leaving Clay wide awake, smiling like an idiot about the big feast they're going to partake in tomorrow.

*

Chapter End Notes

Sun arcana rank 2 -> 3

Charm +3 (working at the convenience store)

Knowledge +3 (studied with Sapnap and Fundy)

Charm +3 (working at convenience store)

Kindness +5 (watched movie)

Knowledge +2 (from answering question correctly)

Moon arcana rank 0 -> 1

Kindness +3 (tending to plants)

Guts +3 (reading book)

Birth of the Vigilantes

Chapter Summary

celebration and the birth of the phantom thieves + new target information

Chapter Notes

finally. mementos appears...next chap tho
i just realised those who played persona 5/royal before would totally know who the traitor is when THAT happens. i cant even disguise it haha

P.S. I totally forgot SmallishBeans' s link actually existed so its gonna start advancing again...

Soon...

5/8 - FRIDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"Man, this...this is awesome!" Nick cries. "Look at all the meat!"

"You carnivore," Floris manages to say past a mouthful of meat.

"Speak for yourself!"

Clay laughs. Darryl himself has gotten a whole mountain of desserts, ranging from tarts to cupcakes to sponge cakes to mousses and of course, muffins. Clay himself just got a little bit of everything, from beans to seafood fried rice to steak, a few slices of fish and lobsters...

"Can you finish that?" Darryl asks, staring at Clay's two plates.

"I ate the Big Bang burger," Clay says, stabbing a fork in Darryl's direction. "Don't tell me what I can't eat."

Darryl shrugs. "Suit yourself."

"Still, did you guys hear?" Floris asks.

"Hear about what?"

Floris sighs. "Exactly. No one's talking about it. They're like...'Krones? Meh'."

Now that Clay thinks about it...

"We can't expect too much either," Darryl says. "That was our first ever heist, and Krones isn't exactly well-known outside of Enderlands."

Floris seems to contemplate this, then he perks up, tail swishing. "Hey, I wanna ask you guys an

important question."

"Yeah?" Nick and Clay asks at the same time, cheeks ballooned with meat.

"Do you want to continue as the Phantom Thieves?" Floris asks. "What I mean is: do you guys wanna continue stealing Treasure, going up against Shadows and other warped people like Krones?"

"Uh," Nick glances from Clay to Darryl and back to Floris. "I thought we were continuing? Like, look at the number of people we helped just by taking Krones down. What if we can use this power to help more people? What do you guys think?"

Clay nods. "If you don't mind, Floris."

"Well," Floris says, settling back beside Clay and gobbling up a piece of chicken. "I was afraid you'd say no."

"It's settled then," Darryl says. "From today onwards, we're the Phantom Thieves!"

"Great!" Floris says, snapping up another piece of chicken. "I wanna teach you guys something, so someone take out the Phan-Site."

"Phan-Site? Oh, you mean that forum that Cheng created?" Nick fishes his phone out and lays it on the table, between the three of them. There seem to be many requests already, though most of them are still pretty petty. Floris scrolls down to the request that Clay had seen yesterday, the one on the stalker. Currently, it's the only request with a full name.

"So, Norbert Nevada," Floris says. "A man stalking his ex-girlfriend. That sounds perfect."

"Perfect? You mean we're going to change his heart? Dude, I've never even heard of the guy. We're not gonna get famous that way," Nick says, leaning back against the seat.

Darryl glares at him. "We're not here to get famous. We're here to help people."

"Yeah, Darryl's right, you oaf," Floris says. Clay snickers. "If she's in trouble, then it's our duty to help them. Tomorrow, I'll show you a place where we can make that happen."

"You know his Palace?" Clay asks, surprised.

"Well, sort of," Fundy says.

"I'll just call in sick tomorrow," Clay says. "You guys are free, right?"

Darryl nods. Nick has a funny expression on his face.

"I'm free," Nick says, sounding constipated. "It's just...I really, really need to use the bathroom."

*

"The lift's *so slow*," Floris complains.

"Not our fault the bathroom was under maintenance," Nick says, sighing. Clay is on the verge of kicking the lift door, because what kind of algorithm is this elevator...? At that exact moment, the elevator dings and the door opens. Nick is just about to step in when someone shoves him from behind, sending him stumbling into Clay.

"What the hell?"

Clay raises a brow at the men in black suits, dressed to the nines, surrounding another important-looking man in sunglasses and his own brand of fancy tuxedo.

"We were here first," Clay says, stepping forward, only to be met by silence from the men. Nick grumbles under his breath.

The man in the middle of the congregation chuckles, but it isn't one of mirth. "I didn't know they started a day care."

And those words...they prod at something within Clay's head. No, not the words...the voice? That deep baritone...Clay feels like he's heard it somewhere before. One of the man's bodyguards turn to them, wearing a sneer.

"Don't talk to Mr Singh like that, or you'll-" He shuts up when the man in the middle, Mr Singh, holds up a hand. He steps back sheepishly, shrinking into himself. "I apologise, sir."

"No need to get so worked up over the riff-raff," Singh says. He steps into the elevator and, without looking back, descends.

"What's the big idea?" Floris rages, slapping at Clay's back with his tiny paws. "He comes out of nowhere, forces his way in, and- and-!"

Clay isn't listening. He's still in the middle of consulting his hazy memories, because he's quite sure he's heard that voice before, though he's not too certain either. In any case, the next elevator arrives quicker than they expect, and they're on the way down to meet up with Darryl again.

When they arrive, Darryl is picking at his final muffin, a pout on his face.

"What's wrong?" Clay asks, as they sit back down. Nick and Floris are still complaining about that man. Singh, was it?

"Nothing," Darryl says with a sigh. "A woman bumped into me on her way out and dropped her entire tray of food. And she blamed it all on me. Honestly, there wasn't any point arguing when she just kept trying to say I was from a poor family. And everyone seemed to agree with her."

"You know," Nick says, his fury finally simmering. He looks exhausted, slumped against the couch. "You think we're outta place here?"

Clay stares down at the empty plates. "Maybe a little."

"Sorry," Darryl says, sounding guilty. "I was the one who booked the reservations and all..."

"Don't be," Floris says, tail wagging like a dog (Clay didn't know foxes can do that). "It was a great meal in all, other than a couple of hiccups."

"Right then," Nick says. "Now that we're all full and happy, let's put all that shit behind us and go home, okay?"

"Mind your language," Darryl mumbles, then smiles tiredly. "Yeah, Floris has something to show us, right?"

"That's right," Floris says, hopping into Clay's bag, looking right at home in it. "Tomorrow, we meet at Valentine Hills, okay? At the interchange."

There is a chorus of "okay"s, and the foursome head on home.

*

5/8 - FRIDAY - EVENING

"Exams on Wednesday," Nick says, slurping his Slurpee as obnoxiously as he can possibly manage.

"I don't need you" - Clay grits his teeth as he punches numbers into his calculator - "to remind me" - his pencil lead breaks and he throws his hands up in frustration - "every five seconds!"

"Ooh, someone's got a short fuse," Nick clicks his tongue. He finishes up the Slurpee and heads for the door. "Gotta throw this in our neighbour's trash. Don't want mom to come back and find out."

"What? That you eat unhealthy food every other day?"

Nick slips on his slippers. "Well, yeah."

He shuffles out onto the driveway, and Clay sighs and replaces his pencil lead. By the time he's done, Nick is back, hands empty.

"Won't your neighbours be mad?" Clay asks.

"I don't explicitly go around telling people I'm throwing my shit into their trash bin," Nick says. "It's a secret between you and me."

"And me," Floris pipes up. He jams a paw in front of Clay. "Hey, spelling error here."

"It's math."

"Even so, it's 'the hypothesis' and not 'the hypotheses'."

Clay begrudgingly changes his answer.

*

??/? - ??? - MIDNIGHT

Clay awakens once more in a blue room, wrists and ankle in cuffs. He stands, rubbing at his temple and walks over to the cell door. Igor sits at his usual spot on the desk, tapping his fingers against the table.

"I see that you have purged one taken over by the sin of lust," Igor says. "It seems that your rehabilitation is going smoothly. Perhaps I have placed my expectations on the right man after all..."

Igor seems to trust him a little more...

"This marks the beginning of your long and arduous journey, Trickster," Igor says. "I sincerely look forward to seeing your future exploits."

Clay returns to the bed once Igor waves him off dismissively. He closes his eyes, and lets sleep take him.

*

Mementos

Chapter Summary

Mementos. fav place in the whole game (i spent the most amount of time here :P)

Chapter Notes

omg i just went back to read thru one of my chapters to look for nevada's (OC) name and i realized that my writing indeed is not up to standard...

Side note how does one incorporate 1 Mores and All Out Attacks into battle

5/9 - SATURDAY - DAYTIME

"So, what are we doing here?" Darryl asks. The station square seems to be a popular weekend hangout spot.

"Okay," Floris says. "Get that app out. You know the one."

Clay retrieves his phone and opens the Meta-Nav. The bookmarked Castle of Lust has already disappeared, leaving their bookmarks bar empty.

"Alright, enter 'Mementos' into Palace," Floris says.

"Mementos?" Nick asks.

"Yeah. Just do it," Floris says, tail swishing. The moment Clay types the word in, the world pulses around them, just like how it does when they enter a Palace. Instantly, everyone around them disappears, leaving the station square empty.

Dream glances at the others, and then down at himself. They've changed into their Phantom Thief outfits, complete with their masks.

"Wait, what?" Sappap is stunned.

Fundy ignores him. "Right, we haven't got time to lose. Let's go."

Fundy bounds towards the entrance to the station, stairs leading deep into the underground. Dream, Sappap and Bad take off after him. Down the stairs, past a corridor, and the trio sees the gantry leading to the platform, currently inactivated. What Dream notices immediately are the vein-like tendrils that have rooted themselves into the concrete walls, pulsing with an invisible heart beat.

"Is this the train station?" Bad asks, poking at a tendril.

"Something like that," Fundy says. "This is what I call Mementos."

The trio turns to him.

"Mementos is, well..." Fundy looks like he's searching for words. "Mementos is everyone's Palace."

"Everyone's Palace?"

"Everyone has desires of some sort, right?" Fundy says. "But not everyone's desires are as twisted and warped as Kronos'. So those milder desires come together and form what is Mementos. This place in reality is a bustling train interchange with many people walking to and fro every day, right? So their collective subconscious has taken form here."

Sapnap and Dream exchange glances.

"Never mind," Fundy says. "Look, what's important here is that our target's Shadow is somewhere here."

"You mean that guy who was stalking his ex-girlfriend?"

"Yeah," Fundy says, hopping past the gantry. "Let's go."

*

["This](#) place is huge."

Dream and company are walking along the tracks, a hollow whistling in the air drowning out their footsteps. Debris swirl around them, not quite touching, but they look close enough to do so. Sure, there were a couple of Shadows in here wandering about like lost souls, but Dream and the others make quick work of them.

"Are you sure the guy's Shadow is here?" Bad asks. "It looks like there are only low-level Shadows."

Fundy groans, throwing his paws up in the air. "This is much too slow. Alright, watch this." He jumps into the air and a bright flash of light blinds Dream and the others. When Fundy lands, he's nothing but a black minivan, yellow stripes running along his body. Only his front fender and the tail end of his body are coloured an orange the same shade as that of his fur - a light cinnamon orange.

"What the h-What in the world?" Sapnap cries. "When were you ever gonna tell us, huh?"

"I thought you'd need the exercise," Fundy says innocently. "Anyway, hop on. Quick!"

The three board the Fundybus, and the moment they do, Clay hears the rattling of metal, like that of chains being dragged along the floor.

"Holy crap! STEP ON IT!" Fundy shrieks.

"Well, first of all, mind your language," Bad says. He rides shotgun beside Dream, who has his hands on the wheel. "Second of all-"

"Move!" Fundy yells. "Move! Get going!"

"You can't move by yourself?" Dream asks.

"Uh, guys," Sapnap says, glancing behind him. "There's this huge ass Shadow behind us."

"I'll explain later! For now, go!" Fundy cries.

Dream wastes no time in slamming his foot down on the accelerator and the car shoots forward, tyres scrabbling against train tracks and gravel.

"It's gaining on us!" Sapnap shouts. "We're gonna die!"

The Fundybus screeches as they turn a sharp bend, the sides of the minivan scraping the walls. Dream can almost feel the breath of the Shadow chasing them, a tickle upon the hairs of his neck. A blast of white in his peripheral vision distracts him, and the van swerves from left to right. Sapnap is thrown from one wall to the other, muttering expletives under his breath.

Another sphere of white misses them, striking the ceiling overhead. Thankfully, it doesn't cause a cave-in - small clouds of debris and dust merely rains down on them. In front of them, Dream can vaguely see something suspicious at the end of their path, past a wandering Shadow.

Bad screams as they barrel forth towards a swirling void of red and black. "Watch out!"

"No! That's good!" Fundy shouts. "Get in there!"

"What? Are you crazy?" Sapnap shouts. Dream's foot is firmly planted on the accelerator, the needle on the speedometer wavering, but waves towards the right. He's trusted Fundy thus far, so if Fundy says go, he's gonna follow.

The van's engine roars, dissolving into weak wheezes as the void swallows them whole.

*

The Fundybus skids along the metal platform, till it comes to a stop. The foursome let out a collective sigh.

"What *was* that?" Bad asks.

"That was the Wither," Fundy says seriously. All of a sudden, the seat beneath Dream disappears, and he drops to the ground with an "Oof!" Sapnap is the first to pick himself up, rubbing at his butt. "It's a strong Shadow that roams Mementos, and it will appear if we stay in one place for too long."

"So that's why you changed into a van," Bad says.

Fundy nods. His gaze is centered on something, or someone, standing in a pool of black goo, bubbling and rising, much like what Shadows do when they're transforming. Does that mean that this guy is...?

"He's our target," Fundy says. "Norbert Nevada. Come on, let's go talk to him."

[Norbert](#) Nevada is a lanky bespectacled man, dressed in a striped oxford and tie, carrying a briefcase in one hand. He leers at them when they approach, lips morphing into a grin.

"Who are you?" Nevada's Shadow is giggling, a palm against his forehead, fingers digging into his scalp. "Oh, you're the rumoured Phantom Thieves, aren't you? Have you come to steal my heart too?"

"So he's heard of us..." Fundy whips his saber out. Dream, Sapnap and Bad follow suit.

Nevada's Shadow stops laughing, his maniac gaze, simmering with rage, trained on them.

"What's wrong with following Yvonne around every once in a while? It's not like I'm gonna kill her...or maybe I should-!" His laughing reaches a fever pitch as the black goo begins to burn, surrounding him with black flames, radiating heat so intense that Dream has already begun to sweat. His fingers touch his mask, ready to call upon his Persona.

"Okay, first of all, you're very fucked up," Sapnap says. "Second of all-"

"I'm fucked up?" Nevada's Shadow bellows. "*I'm* the fucked up one? Have you *seen* what Isabelle Marion has done to her students?"

"Look out," Fundy says, his fur tousled by the draft spiraling around them.

[Dream](#) watches as Nevada's Shadow is completely engulfed by the black inferno, and an orange monster rises in his place, braided purple hair dancing on his head, a lone eye blinking on his belly. He attacks without warning, rushing them and landing a lucky punch on Fundy. Fundy yelps, stumbling and falling. Shadow Nevada laughs, emanating a reddish glow from his body.

"Screw off!" Sapnap raises the iron pipe, channeled with electricity, over his head, slamming down on the orange creature. Electricity courses through his body, rendering Shadow Nevada defenseless on the ground, dizzy from the shock. Dream cocks his pistol, barrel aimed at Shadow Nevada, alongside Fundy, Sapnap and Bad.

"Ow, ow!" Shadow Nevada cries. "Wait! Wait, I give up!"

That was easy. Dream and Bad lower their guns the same instant Fundy shouts, "No! Don't-!"

Shadow Nevada cackles, leaping to his feet, jumping Bad and pummeling him into the ground. Bad rips off his mask, summoning Carmen, managing to throw Shadow Nevada off with a beam of dancing fire.

"Oh you utter *bastard*!" Sapnap slams his palm against the ground, electrical shocks racing through the earth, headed straight for Shadow Nevada. Shadow Nevada shrieks in pain, finally collapsing, the fight drained out of him.

"I really give up this time!" Shadow Nevada coughs and hacks. Dream frowns. Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me. However, Shadow Nevada must really mean what he said, because he morphs back into his human form, staring at the ground, the picture of pitiable.

["You...you guys are strong,"](#) Shadow Nevada says. He then gets on his hands and knees, assuming a kowtow position. "Please! Please help us!"

"Help you? With what?" Bad asks, nursing his bruised cheek from where he was punched. Trust Bad to be so nice.

"Isabelle Marion," Shadow Nevada says. "She's...she's bad to the bone. Please..." All he mumbles now is a bunch of gibberish, but it seems that he has been repeating the name "Isabelle Marion" again and again. Dream wonders who she is. She must have caused Nevada some grief, for his Shadow to be begging them like this.

Fundy lowers his slingshot and stuffs his saber back into its sheath, whiskers twitching. "We'll do something about this Isabelle Marion. Only if you promise you'd stop stalking your ex, though."

"I...I will," Shadow Nevada says, and Dream is rather amused. He has never really seen a Shadow smile at them with that kind of sincerity before. Just like how Shadow Krones' vanished when he returned to his real self, Shadow Nevada dissolves into blue butterflies, disappearing through the

ceiling.

["Alright,](#) our work is done here," Fundy says. He changes into the same conspicuous minivan as he did. "Now, there's one more place I want to check before we leave."

"Will that thing...the Wither be out there?" Bad asks, fidgeting nervously.

"Should be gone by now," Fundy says. Dream hops into the driver's seat, joined by Bad, and Sapnap takes his place at the back. Dream steps on the accelerator and they re-enter the void, which brings them back to where they had just been when they were escaping from the Wither. Dream freezes, fingers clenching the steering wheel when he hears the unmistakable clinking of dragged chains...

"What are you waiting for? Go!" Fundy shouts, and they are off.

They must have been stealthy if they managed to avoid the Wither till they reach a new platform, a platform they hadn't been to yet. Wasting no time, they get out onto the platform and Fundy turns back into his fox form. Together, they run down the stationary escalator, thick heels thumping against the steel steps till they reach the next platform.

However, unlike the previous area, a large stone wall impedes their path.

"Hmm, it doesn't look like it's gonna open," Fundy says, tapping the door with a paw. "Alright, I think it's time to get out of here."

"Wait, what do you mean it's not gonna open?" Sapnap presses both palms against the wall. Just like the surrounding walls, the door is lined with veins running every which way, with no obvious pattern. Bad slams a fist against it, yelping in pain when his knuckles connect with solid wall. Fundy snorts.

"Didn't you hear me? It's not gonna open," Fundy says. "At least, not now. We should try again later."

"Other than that weird Wither thing, I think it's a good place to train, though," Sapnap says, the trio following Fundy back up the escalator. Dream visibly relaxes when he no longer hears chains. "We're gonna hafta get stronger if we wanna continue this Phantom Thief thing, right?"

"For once, you catch on quick," Fundy says, nodding. He gets onto the tracks and transforms once more into the minivan. "Get in. We're leaving."

*

[5/9 - SATURDAY - EVENING](#)

"So, as it turns out, I'm taking the Sunday shift tomorrow," Clay says, scrolling through the messages on his phone. "Same time as you, I think."

"Oh. Yeah, sure," Nick mumbles distractedly. Naturally. He's playing that multiplayer game again. He's about to die, judging from his health bar, so Clay can't exactly blame him. Clay, on the other hand, just wants to collapse from fighting Shadows all day.

Floris had requested, through Clay, for Yao Yi to search the Phan-Site to see whether the name Isabelle Marion has been mentioned. What Shadow Nevada said could be a lead, but it could lead them to a dead end as well. Still, as the Phantom Thieves, they should help people in trouble, even people like Nevada. Yao Yi mentioned that she could try, but there are no guarantees.

"Well, we'll know if something turns up," Floris says, snuggling his snout into his flank. "I'm beat. So, uh, good night."

Clay wraps himself in a blanket cocoon - it's surprisingly cold today - and grabs that new library book from the shelf. *The Alluring Dancer*. It refers to Carmen, a femme fatale that had manipulated many men.

Clay wakes up halfway through the night with a book in his face. He groans, placing the half-read book back onto the shelf, rolls over, and falls back asleep.

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The Councillor

Chapter Summary

Of exams and school assemblies...

In which Tammy Montgomery makes her appearance

Chapter Notes

MIDTERM BREAK HAS STARTED WOOOOO

Dr Montgomery is an OC.

Also just wondering what's the western equivalent of a bow? Is it a handshake?

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

5/10 - SUNDAY - DAYTIME

"Welc-oh."

Nick's face falls when he realizes who he's talking to, a man in a posh business suit who looks way too regal to be in this humble part of town, much less a convenience store. Intrigued, Clay watches out of the corner of his eye where he's stocking the shelves with boxes of juice. Who is this man, and what connection does he have with Nick?

"How are you doing?" The man does not seem hostile, so Clay has half a mind to leave them be, but his curiosity gets the better of him. He slots the juice boxes neatly between the other boxes of ice green tea and ice lemon tea, all while eavesdropping on their conversation.

"Fine."

"I see," the man says in that pleasant tone of his. "This is nice. A quaint little place like this."

Nick hums, voice lacking any enthusiasm.

"I just came to check up on you," the man says. Clay begins to walk back to the storeroom with an empty cardboard box. The man glances at his wristwatch. "How's your mother?"

Nick's answer is muffled when Clay slices the cardboard box with his penknife, placing it atop the stack of cardboard boxes meant for recycling. When he returns to the store with a box of chips, the man is able to leave. He tips his hat and disappears out the door.

"Who's that?" Clay asks, setting the box down on the ground.

Nick gives him a tight and embarrassed smile. "Uh, my dad."

"Your dad?" Clay's eyes widen a fraction.

"Yeah," Nick says. "After Neil died, my parents had a divorce. My dad lives in some penthouse out there in the city centre. He says he's got some kind of business appointment, so he's in the area."

"I see," Clay says. "You don't seem to like him."

"He's..." Nick presses his lips together. "He's fine. It's nothing, really."

Nick has opened up to Clay a little, and that warm feeling spreads up his chest. He offers to relieve Nick, who gives him a grateful smile.

*

5/10 - SUNDAY - EVENING

"Exams start tomorrow."

Nick and Clay are studying in their room today, since Mrs Armstrong is home and using the dining table for her work. Or at least *Nick* is studying. Clay is scrolling through Instagram, and Fundy honestly can't be bothered, telling them he's going for a walk and stalking out of the window. He's a smart fox. Human. Fox. He's definitely a fox with that fur and the whiskers and the tail...

"Hey, get back to work," Nick says, glancing up from his worksheets.

Clay grumbles, placing his phone back down on the ground. He lays his cheek against his arm as he scribbles down his answer to that Chemistry workbook.

Fuck exams.

*

5/11 - MONDAY - MORNING

A phenomenon occurs when you think the second hand stopped for more than one second. What is it called? How the heck is Clay supposed to know? Chronostasis? That seems to be the most likely option out of those four.

A soul is composed of appetite, spirit and _____?

Uh. Logic?

Screw exams.

*

5/12 - TUESDAY - LUNCHTIME

"What did you put for that question?" Nick asks as they head over to their table at the crowded cafeteria. Clay stabs his fork into his steak. "The one about the lethal woman?"

"Femme fatale."

"Oh, same," Nick chomps down on the forkful of meat.

Clay sighs in relief. At least he's got one question right. It's too soon to celebrate though...

Because tomorrow's another day of hell.

*

5/13 - WEDNESDAY - AFTERNOON

What kind of magic was used to find water sources in the ground? Magic? Where the hell did this question come from? Uh...between numerology...okay, that option is totally out. It's not tarot reading as well, so it must be dowsing?

Who came up with the Pythagoras Theorem? Oh, surely it wouldn't be...Pythagoras?

[Clay](#) slams his forehead against the table after the teacher leaves the classroom. God, that was a mess.

"Hey," Darryl turns around in his seat. "Let's get going."

Clay blinks at him. "Going? Where?"

"The assembly," Darryl says, blinking. "You okay?"

"Oh, just, uh, peachy," Clay says, gathering up his things and stuffing them into his bag. Floris yelps. Several classmates turn their heads, but Clay is quick enough to zip the bag up and stand. Darryl is unsuccessfully stifling his laughter into his hand. They join their classmates headed the same way, diving into the throngs of students chattering about the examinations.

*

"I wonder what's this special assembly for..."

"Yeah, right in the middle of our exams?"

"I wanna go home and study!"

The gymnasium is full of boisterous noises as usual, with people fighting to talk over each other. Everyone settles down when the principal walks up on stage, wiping at his bald head with his handkerchief. A woman follows behind him, dressed in a laboratory coat over a flowing magenta dress and heels, a lanyard hung around her neck. Clay hasn't seen her before - she must be new.

["Attention"](#) all students," the principal says into the microphone. "In light of the incident with Mr Peter Krones, who has been rightfully turned over to the authorities, we have decided to invite a counselor to help those who had suffered under his hand."

"Oh, so the school's finally deciding to do something about it," Darryl mumbles.

"I would like to welcome Dr Tammy Montgomery," the principal says. "She will be stationed here till mid-November, so if you want to, please see her before then. Dr Montgomery, would you like to say a few words?"

Montgomery walks up to the microphone, lifting a hand to adjust it - she is petite, after all - and whacks her hand against the microphone element, sending a screeching sound through the loudspeakers. Clay winces. That did a number on his eardrums. With a PA student's help, she manages to get the microphone working again, shortened to suit her height.

"Good morning students," Montgomery says. "It's a pleasure to meet you all today. As Principal Karlson has stated, I will be using the health examination room so feel free to drop by. Oh, and I

have snacks, if you'd like."

"Snacks...?" Clay can almost see Darryl's mouth watering at the prospect.

"No muffins."

Darryl droops.

"Thank you, Dr Montgomery. There are some students for whom it is mandatory to receive counselling. You will be informed by your respective homeroom teachers tomorrow. Are there any questions?"

Silence.

"Well then, if there are no further questions, you can leave now. Dismissed!"

Without even waiting for the last syllable to be pronounced, the students proceed to file out of the gymnasium like bees from a hive. Clay and Darryl regroup with Nick directly outside, waiting for the crowd to thin.

"Man, what was that about?" Floris says, sticking half his body out from the bag. "Counselling?"

"Yeah," Darryl says, picking at a loose thread of his uniform. "I think it'll be helpful for many, given what Krones has done."

Nick looks unconvinced. "Maybe."

"Mr Clay, Mr Armstrong and Mr Noveschosch, right?"

Clay glances over at the direction of the voice, only to see one Dr Montgomery walking over, hands behind her back. Clay straightens his shoulders, leaning against the wall. Floris has quickly sunk back into the bag, unseen and unheard.

"You already know, but I'm Tammy Montgomery," Dr Montgomery says. "I've been instructed to give counselling to you three specifically."

"Uh...what?" Nick scratches his head.

"Us three?" Darryl asks.

"Yes," Montgomery says with a smile. "Apparently, the three of you suffered the most at Mr Krones' hands, and the school believes that it would be beneficial if you were to speak your mind about the incident. To talk it out. I guess I'm informing you ahead of time, huh?" She giggles into her hand. "In any case, please come to the health examination room whenever you are free sometime this week."

With that, she waves goodbye to them, and strides off.

"She doesn't seem *too* bad," Darryl says. "Maybe we should give it a go."

Nick bites his lip. Clay isn't too enthusiastic about it, either. Also, it may have sunk in rather late, but did she just call him Mr Clay?

"Actually," Floris says, once more lifting his head out of the bag. "I think it's a good idea to go. Think about it: she's a counselor, right? That must mean she has some experience with the cognitive function."

"And?" Nick and Clay ask in unison. Floris sighs exaggeratedly.

"Look, the Metaverse is based off people's cognition, right?" Floris says. "Don't you think it'll be great if we better knew how it worked? And who better to ask than someone you're supposed to see in the first place?"

Floris makes a good point. Darryl does assure them that he would make an appointment first, and tell them how it goes afterwards. Satisfied, the group leaves the gymnasium now that there are barely any students around, making their way home to study.

*

5/14 - THURSDAY - LUNCHTIME

"Hey."

Clay looks up, in the middle of chewing a meatball, seated all by his lonesome at the cafeteria. Yao Yi plops down opposite him. "I found information on your girl."

"My girl? I have a girl?"

Yao Yi rolls her eyes. "Fine. Your woman, then. I got into contact with that guy you told me about. Nevada, was it? He told me that it's too dangerous to talk about this Isabelle on a public site, so I've arranged for him to meet you in person."

"Dangerous? What is she? A mafia boss?"

Yao Yi shrugs. "I don't know. In any case, I told Mr Nevada to look for you at Valentine Hills today. At around five."

"Five?" He'd just tell Niki he needs to leave earlier.

"Yeah." Yao Yi raises a brow. "That good for you?"

"Great. It's fine. Awesome."

Yao Yi stands. "I told him to look for a boy in the Enderlands uniform carrying a fox around. Anyway, good luck with your next heist."

Clay waves goodbye to her as she skips off back to class.

*

5/14 - THURSDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"Are you...Mr Clay?"

Why does everyone call him that? Clay looks up to see a familiar man approaching him, except this time he lacks the black flames. Norbert Nevada stands before him, in all his glory. Clay stuffs his phone into his pocket.

"That I am."

Nevada throws furtive glances around. "Look, uh, just keep this between us, but...um..." He cracks his knuckles. "About Marion. She is a famous artist."

"A famous artist?" Makes sense that Clay has never heard of her.

"Yeah. The New Age Picasso and all that," Nevada says. "Anyways, I want you to steal her heart. Make her confess what she's done."

"About that," Clay says, shifting from one foot to the other. "What *did* she do?"

"O-Oh," Nevada looks away sheepishly. "She takes in young artists in whom she sees talent and pretends to nurture them, but what she really does is that she steals their ideas and passes their artwork off as her own."

"That sounds serious," Floris says, voice muffled.

Nevada glances past Clay's shoulder, at his bag. "Is that your fox?"

Right. Yao Yi *did* say she told him about Floris. Clay unzips the bag and Floris peeks out. Nevada looks satisfied. "It was almost like he's talking."

Well, he actually is, but Nevada doesn't have to know that. "Anyway, continue with your story."

"Ah, yes," Nevada clasps his fingers together. "When they can no longer produce new artwork for her, she throws us out like strays!" He clenches his fists. "Me and my senior, he...he couldn't it anymore. He had nothing under his name, nothing to show for his talent. Because Marion is a big figure in the art world, she uses her influence to stop us from becoming successful in our artistic career. So my senior...he...he hung himself. Just recently."

An uncomfortable silence hangs between them.

"Your mentor's name," Clay says. "Isabelle Marion, correct?" They may have to look into this after all if what Nevada is telling him is true.

"I was removed from her household as well a couple of years ago," Nevada says. "Only one person - my junior - is still under her care. Please, for his sake, please steal Marion's heart!"

"We'll...we'll get back to you," Clay says. Nevada nods. "For now, we will have to investigate."

"Thank you," Nevada says, shaking Clay's hand. "Thank you so much."

Nevada heads off towards the train station after he's said his piece, leaving Clay and Floris contemplating the new information they've received. If this Marion is an important figure in the world of art, then wouldn't stealing her heart also help others, while boosting their popularity at the same time? First things first, they're going to have to relay this information to the team, and see what they think.

*

Chapter End Notes

Charm +3 (working at convenience store)
Chariot arcana rank 3 -> 4
Knowledge +5 (studying with Nick)

A Suspicious Man

Chapter Summary

A suspicious man in a turquoise shirt stalks them...

Chapter Notes

Skeppy lol

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

5/14 - THURSDAY - EVENING

"Okay, so we have new information on our potential target," Clay says. Once again, Darryl is on video call, speaking with them from his computer.

"The Marion woman, right?" Nick says, leaning back against the rolling chair, legs kicked up on the table. "She's pretty famous 'round these parts. Like, she's doing some exhibit sometime soon, right?"

"Yeah," Darryl says. "It's at the huge gallery over at Lancer."

"Lancer?" Floris asks.

"Lancer Lane," Nick explains. "It's pretty far from here...about forty-five minutes by train. Still, that place is a studio haven. Like, a lot of artists and musicians gather there."

"Oh."

"I think this target is worth checking out," Clay says. "She apparently plagiarizes her students' artwork, and when they are no longer able to provide her new pieces, she gives them the boot."

"What a horrible person," Darryl slumps forward on his desk.

"Yeah," Nick says, sighing. "So, if everyone's on board with this, we can do some investigation tomorrow. Or during the weekend."

"Speaking of weekend, I'm taking that Sunday shift with you again," Clay says. "And the Friday shift too."

"Oh, right, exams," Nick says, nodding. He turns to Darryl. "If there's nothing else to discuss, I think we can sleep for now. Good job on getting through the exams, guys."

Clay doesn't even want to think about it. Darryl logs off and Nick decides to stay up a while longer to watch a movie. Meanwhile, Clay climbs into bed, Floris sleeping by his head, and he falls asleep in a matter of seconds.

*

5/15 - FRIDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"Hey, are you Jude's sister?"

Ruby freezes, the scanner in her hand, as she stares up at the man talking to her. She splutters, "No, I'm not."

"Oh. Must have gotten the wrong person then. You look a lot like this guy I know. Thought you were him for a second," the man says. "So, uh, you gonna ring that up?"

Ruby's fingers tighten on the scanner, bagging his purchase more forcefully than she has to. She hands it to him, and he doesn't even bat an eyelash when he leaves.

In the break room, after they have changed out, Clay finds Ruby sitting at the couch, sighing with her head in her hands.

"What's wrong? You seemed pretty upset when that guy talked to you."

"O-Oh, um," Ruby's eyes are unfocused, staring into space. "Sorry, I kinda zoned out."

"He asked about 'Jude'?"

"Oh," Ruby stares at the ground. Clay moves to sit beside her, kicking his legs up on the coffee table. "Um...Jude's my brother, actually."

"Then did you lie to him?"

"Oh, so you heard that too, huh?" Ruby's eyes are shining. "Yeah, the thing is, he just recognises Jude from Jude's job, so yeah. It's nothing; don't worry about it." She leaps to her feet, insisting that she has to head for her next job and rushing out the door.

Ruby's opened up just a tiny bit more, but for some reason, Clay is a little intrigued by the unsettling development...

*

5/15 - FRIDAY - EVENING

"Thanks for coming in on such short notice."

Joel leans back against his chair. "Pretty surprised you'd still come, given what you heard about me."

"I trust you," Clay says, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, placing the empty glass on the table. The smell is less pungent, the taste less revolting. In fact, Clay would say that the medicine reminds him of grape soda.

"That's good, that's good," Joel says. "Now, do you feel any dizziness? Itchy eyes? Rashes?"

"No, no and no."

"Great," Joel says. "You may experience them later. If that happens, come see me immediately, okay?"

Clay nods. "Just wondering, but that medical error you made..."

"Oh, that?" Joel looks wistful. "For the record, I didn't kill anyone. And besides, the one who declared the drug ready was Rivers herself." He keys in some data sets. "Rivers wanted the credit, so she skipped the fucking clinical trials. Naturally, the drug worsened a patient's condition. She slipped into a coma."

"That patient was yours?"

"Yeah," Joel says. "It was an illness we never came across before, so we were developing a drug to combat that illness. And then, wanting to claim the credit for herself, Rivers made a medical error and laid the blame on me, the leading scientist. She got promoted, somehow, and kicked me all the way out here into this backwater alley."

"It's not that bad," Clay says, scratching at his elbow.

"Yeah, it's not," Joel says. "Actually, I kinda like it here. Better than being out there in that hospital."

Clay nods. The itching is getting worse. When he glances down, he sees a breakout of red dots on his arm, spreading rapidly towards his wrist. Joel grabs a tube off his shelf and spreads the cooling gel onto Clay's arm. The itchiness is terrible, and Clay's eyes water, digging his nails into his palms to stop himself from scratching.

"There you go," Joel says. "Oh, look, it's almost seven."

"Fifteen more minutes. I don't take that long to walk home."

"Good, good," Joel muses with a devilish grin. "You can suffer here for another five minutes."

*

5/16 - SATURDAY - EVENING

"Hey, you're back," Nick says, voice barely audible over the rain. Clay stands at the front of the house, drenched, as he removes his soaked sneakers and places them on the shoe rack, stripping off his wet socks and throwing them into the laundry basket.

"Yeah, I'm back," Clay says.

"And we're wet as heck," Floris mutters. He leaps onto the ground and shakes his body, spraying water all over the floor. Nick yelps, pausing his movie and leaping to his feet.

"Oi! Now I've got to clean that up!"

Floris sticks his tongue out. Clay ignores their subsequent shouting match (thank goodness Mrs Armstrong isn't home) and he heads up to the bathroom to change.

He lays on his stomach once he's changed into dry clothes, scrolling through weblinks on Google. All he can find are Isabelle Marion's achievements; there is nothing on her plagiarism, no forum posts, nothing. Well, Nevada did say that she is a very influential figure in the art world, so she *could* technically dispel any rumours.

He rolls onto his back, rubbing at his eyes. He needs a break. Thankfully, the itching on his arm has died down, though Joel did give him the tube of gel (free of charge) in case the rashes return.

Clay reaches over to his bag and pulls out *The Alluring Dancer*, flips through the pages till he reaches the bookmark, and continues to read.

*

5/17 - SUNDAY - DAYTIME

"I'm tired," Nick yawns as they exit the break room. The sun is still high in the sky. It's only three in the afternoon, so they've got quite a lot of time to kill before curfew. Darryl had asked them to meet up at the Valentine Hills crepe shop to celebrate the end of examinations, which Clay and Nick readily agree.

"No kidding," Clay says, taking the underpass to meet Darryl at the other side of the road.

Darryl waves to them when he sees them, fingers clutched around the strap of his gym bag.

"This might sound a little weird," Darryl says, lowering his voice. "But I think I'm being followed."

"Followed?" Floris asks.

"Yeah," Darryl says. "I just can't shake the feeling that someone's staring at me." His eyes dart around. "It could be just me though."

They make their way towards the crepe stand smack in the middle of Central Street. At this time on a Sunday, Central Street is positively busy. People flock to the strip malls, to clubs and underground casinos. Students mill about at arcades and clothes shops.

Woman in red evening dress. Child with a birthday balloon. A family of four having a meal at Wild Duck Burger...It may be a psychological effect, but now even Clay can sense someone's eyes on them. Darryl is fidgeting more than usual. Even Nick and Floris seem to be on edge, as if tapping into their intuition, warning them about the danger present.

A hand clamps down on Darryl's shoulder, and Darryl shrieks the loudest he's ever done.

"Whoa!"

The person who assaulted them raises his hands, showing them his palms. "Hey there, didn't mean to scare ya."

"Excuse me?" Darryl grabs his chest, face flushed. "You were *tailing* me!"

"Tailing you?" the stranger scoffs. "I wasn't tailing you. I'm chasing my dreams."

Clay wants to puke.

"Dude, no offense," Nick says, holding up an arm between Darryl and the stranger. "That was the worst pickup line I've heard in my life. Besides, who the hell are you?"

"Pickup line?" the stranger tilts his head, confused. "That wasn't a pickup line. You misunderstand." His voice is loud and bright and seems to attract the attention of everyone around them, most of whom steer clear of their ragtag group. "Oh, right, where are my manners? I'm Zak, Zak Ahmed. Nice to meet you."

He sticks a hand out for a handshake, but frowns when none of them take it.

"This guy's suspicious as heck!" Floris whispers in Clay's ear.

"Zak?"

The boy turns towards the road, where a sleek, white sedan pulls up next to them. The window winds down and within sits a woman, her youthful face devoid of wrinkles or sagging skin, blond hair curled around her ears, dancing along her cheeks and the base of her neck. Her gown is white, a striking red rose pinned to the breast.

"Oh, Master!" Zak cries. "I've found my muse!"

Muse?

"Your muse?" the woman says, twirling a lock of hair around her finger. Zak stabs a finger at Darryl, who looks like a deer caught in the headlights. The woman titters. "I see. It's good that you have found your inspiration again, but you must know that it is incredibly rude to approach someone you don't know like that."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Zak says, scratching his head. "So, uh...here." He digs three slips of crumpled paper from his back pocket, holding it out to them. Clay stares at it suspiciously, raising a brow when he sees a familiar name.

Isabelle Marion's name is printed on the ticket, alongside her exhibit name. Back To My Roots, a collection of paintings and other forms of artwork capturing the essence of the countryside. Clay snatches it up, taking a closer look at it. It can't be...but it is! How are they so lucky?

"Well, my Master's exhibition starts tomorrow, so I hope you can be there," Zak says, waving. "Especially you, cute guy in the red hoodie." He sends a few finger hearts at Darryl, then goes enters the vehicle. The woman in the car, of whom Clay believes is their next target, dips her head, and she winds the window up. The car speeds off, joining the traffic as the lights turn green.

"Uh, are you okay?" Floris asks, pawing at Darryl's arm.

"Hello?" Nick pokes at his other arm. "That's it. He's gone. Darryl-dot-E-X-E has stopped working."

Darryl shakes his head, the flush still rather prominent on his cheeks. He pulls on his hoodie, as if attempting to hide his blush. No way. Darryl has a thing for shitty pickup lines?

"What're you staring at?" Darryl whines. "Let's go get crepes."

They settle down at a nearby bench, three teenage boys squeezing against each other, crepes in their hands. Behind them stands a large plum tree, flowers blossoming beautifully, though petals litter the ground. Clay licks the ice cream at the corner of his lips, holding his crepe out for Floris to take a bite. Can foxes eat crepes? Then again, Floris isn't a normal fox.

[So](#), Nevada mentioned that there is another student living with Marion. I think that guy may be him," Clay says, biting into his crepe and carefully avoiding where Floris has just chomped down on.

"Yeah, probably. Zak, was it?" Nick says. "Well, Darryl, your charms has managed to woo the next target right into our laps."

Darryl flushes an even darker shade. "That sounds wrong. On so many levels."

"It's fine if you got a thing for, uh, people with shitty pickup lines," Clay says, ignoring Darryl's glare. "You must admit, that was bad."

"I'm chasing my dream'," Floris scoffs. "Would have worked better on Clay."

Nick snorts, almost choking on his crepe.

"Jokes aside," Clay says. "We somehow got free tickets to the exhibition, so I think we should do some fieldwork there. Besides, our target would be there, right?"

The rest of them hum in approval.

"Okay, so we'll go tomorrow," Clay says. "After school. We should be able to reach home in time for curfew."

"Dude, I really don't wanna get grounded," Nick says, slurping up a droplet of melted ice cream from his crepe. Darryl shoots him a judgmental stare. "So we'd better make it quick."

"Right then," Clay says, standing. Floris yelps, almost falling out of the bag. "Let's get on home and rest up."

Chapter End Notes

Charm +3 (working at convenience store)

Sun arcana rank 3 -> 4

Guts +2 (clinical trial)

Temperance arcana rank 2 -> 3

Charm +3 (from reading book)

Charm +3 (working at convenience store)

Art Exhibition

Chapter Summary

The Phantom Thieves attend the art exhibition. The stakes are higher.

Chapter Notes

WARNING: slight mention of nudity but no one's actually nude here

hello hows life failed a test lifes great excellent can't be better. also i think this chapter isn't exactly up to standard, mostly because i skipped a whole event in the game im not sure whether i can gel this back together...

5/18 - MONDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"I feel so...mature," Darryl says as they show the security guard at the entrance to the gallery their tickets. "We're going to an art exhibition, we're looking at artwork like adults."

"Are we?" Nick yawns, standing with his hands tucked into his pockets. "We're still wearing the Enderlands uniform, though."

"Guys, focus," Floris hisses.

They stroll around the gallery, pausing to look at a few pieces of artwork that intrigue them. A flock of birds flying across a vast field, wings spread as they embrace the wind. Flowers dotting a field, injecting colour into an otherwise monochrome piece. A portrait of a famous country music artiste, singing her heart out with a microphone in hand. The brushstrokes look like those from a traditional Chinese painting.

"You came!"

Strange boy - what was his name again? Zak? - runs up to them, pushing past a crowd of people, hand shooting out to grab Darryl's, shaking it profusely. Darryl appears stunned, freezing on the spot. Clay hides a snigger.

"You actually came! God, I gotta show you around this place," Zak says. "You guys can go entertain yourselves. Bye!" Without even waiting for a response, Zak is already dragging Darryl away, leaving Clay, Floris and Nick alone.

"Uh, what just happened?" Nick rubs his nape.

"He caught his dream," Floris cackles. "Come on, let's go see what we can find on our end."

They don't have to look far. In the very next minute, they chance upon several reporters and journalists, holding microphones and video cameras and other high tech equipment with flashing and blinking lights. The object of their attention is the same woman whom they met yesterday in

the car, now dressed in a blue floral dress, wearing a sunhat.

"Miss Marion! How do you come up with so many art styles? We can hardly believe they all stem from one person!"

Marion chuckles. "Please, do not flatter me. While it takes much diligence to maintain my standard, but my motivation and inspiration to continue living this humble life arise from the support of people who appreciate my art. Moreover, living in my humble shack has granted me freedom from avarice that threaten many budding artistes."

"My art, my ass," Nick says.

"We shouldn't pass judgement just yet," Floris says. "Still, that's a little arrogant of her, isn't it?"

"Whoa!" Clay nearly falls as he is jostled about by Marion fans, rushing to get a picture of her or her autograph...or something. Floris dives back into his bag and Nick grabs Clay's arm, pulling him out of the exhibit, past the bewildered security guard. Once outside, they lean their backs against the wall to catch their breath. Good Lord, who knew that visiting an art exhibit would be so tiring?

"Okay, I'm gonna check the web and look her up," Nick says. "Maybe if we searched her name and 'plagiarism', we'll find something."

"We'll search the Phan-Site, then," Floris says. "Come on, get to it! Chop, chop!"

*

["You](#) guys ditched me!"

Darryl folds his arms, voice going an octave higher than normal. Clay chews his cheese bun thoughtfully. Nick wipes his mouth with the provided napkin.

"Here," Clay says, holding out another wrapped sandwich. "Have a sandwich."

Darryl snatches the sandwich from his hand and takes an angry bite.

"Okay, so I found this," Nick says, shoving his phone screen into their faces. It's a blog post on WordPress, detailing how her mentor ruined their life and destroyed their name, eradicating any chances of getting any headway in the art world. It contained mostly expletives, but there is at least a mention of Isabelle Marion's name. She apparently abuses her disciples, starving them till they gave up their ideas, their artworks, and it corroborates Nevada's story, about how she kicks her pupils out of her house when they are no longer useful to her.

"Did you manage to get anything out of Zak, Darryl?" Clay asks.

"Not really," Darryl says. "Though, he seemed kinda weird when we were looking at this painting. He looked kinda...uncomfortable."

"Uncomfortable? That guy? He looked like the type who wouldn't have a care in the world," Nick says, head lolling against the wall.

"If the post is true, then he would be having his ideas stolen from him as well," Floris says. "He won't know when he's going to get kicked out next."

"Still, he's Marion's last remaining disciple, right, according to that Nevada guy," Clay says. "I don't think she'll get rid of him that easily."

The silence hangs in the air. Darryl finishes up his sandwich and crushes the wrapper in his fist.

"Right," Darryl says, produces a slip of paper from his pocket. "Zak gave me his number."

Clay waggles his brows. Floris whistles. Nick drags a hand across his face and groans. "We don't need that-"

"Oh, would you shut up," Darryl sighs. "I'm not into him, no matter what you say. The thing is, he's not into me either, and that he's actually looking for someone to paint, since he has a lack of inspiration lately. So, he asked me to contact him if I'm willing to be painted."

"What? Like, nude?" Nick asks.

Darryl blushes redder than a tomato. "Absolutely not."

"It could come to that." Clay hums, touching his chin. Darryl slaps him on the arm.

Darryl clears his throat. "Anyways, I've decided to take him up on the offer."

"Yeah, that's what I thought too," Floris says. "It's a good opportunity to collect information. All of us can go, and if he tries anything funny, you guys should be strong enough to hold him off."

"Provided he doesn't call the cops on us after that," Nick mutters.

"I'll contact him later tonight, and get back to you on that," Darryl says, once more stuffing the paper back into his pocket. "Now then, shall we go?"

"It's best to rest up for tonight. Meanwhile, don't draw attention to yourselves." Floris tucks himself back into Clay's bag. They head to the train station together, chattering about the boring art exhibition and the overexcited journalists.

*

[5/18 - MONDAY - EVENING](#)

<Phoenix SC> You're finally online again

<Dream> sorry was busy

Today, they're not doing anything special, just hunting mobs and building their own empire with redstone contraptions, obsidian and Nether stuff. Honestly, Phoenix SC is a way better engineer than Clay is giving him credit for.

<Phoenix SC> It's fine

<Phoenix SC> you're a student, right?

<Phoenix SC> you should concentrate on work

They play in silence for a while.

<Dream> Yeah, exams suck.

Clay smashes up a bunch of netherite blocks, a fair distance from that pack of Piglins over yonder.

<Phoenix SC> exams

<Phoenix SC> i dont know much about exams at my age

<Phoenix SC> my daughter doesn't really talk to me about them.

Phoenix SC stares at the ground. Clay can almost feel his sorrow through the screen.

<Dream> she doesn't talk to you?

<Phoenix SC> too busy being with her own friends

<Phoenix SC> too busy with her schoolwork

Clay isn't sure what to say. He bites his lip, thinking of a response. He's halfway through concocting his sentence when Phoenix SC types in the chat again.

<Phoenix SC> she's not the type to ask for help

<Phoenix SC> so i hope she's doing okay

<Phoenix SC> i wish i can help her somewhat, though

Phoenix SC seems to be opening up to Clay just a little more. They carry on with the session as per normal, with Phoenix SC teaching Clay how to make an Eye of Ender to detect strongholds. Perhaps that could be useful to them when determining the location of the Treasure...or something. As usual, Phoenix SC logs off first and then Clay leaves as well.

*

5/19 - TUESDAY - LUNCHTIME

"He replied me," Darryl says, turning in his seat such that his back faces the wall. He shows Clay his phone, opened to his and Zak's chat on Instant Messaging. Zak's profile picture is of a turquoise head sticking his tongue out...oh, that's his turquoise hoodie covering his hair, complete with sunglasses and a turquoise face mask...Clay was about to judge him for something totally different there.

"Today? That's pretty sudden," Clay hums. "Besides, I've got work today."

"I can go with Nick," Darryl says. "We'll update you."

"When does he want to meet?"

"Uh, four. At his studio at Lancer."

"I'm gonna," Clay says, typing into his phone, "call in sick. Thank God I've only signed a two-month contract. This is annoying."

"Tell me about it," Darryl says. "But hey, at least you're getting extra pocket money."

"I don't even get pocket money," Clay says, shutting his phone off after getting the affirmative from his boss. She's a little strict on store management, but at least she's pretty lenient and understanding on such matters.

"Oof," Darryl mumbles. "Okay, I'm gonna tell Nick, and we can meet up after school."

*

5/19 - TUESDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"What kind of Phantom Thief takes the train *then* walks to their destination?" Nick complains, kicking a pebble.

Lancer is filled with many studios, walls covered in beautiful graffiti. Clay has to give these artists kudos for transforming what could have been a boring neighbourhood into a lively one with splashes of colour. They pass by several dance and music studios as well, electronic dance music blasting from within one of them.

"Found it," Darryl says, looking up from Google Maps. It's a two-storey house - not a studio, surprisingly - and the walls are a blinding white.

Nick walks up to the door, reaching for the knocker and rapping it a few times against the wooden door. "Hello? Anyone home?"

There is the sound of footsteps thumping against the wooden floor, and who should appear at the door but Zak? Zak Ahmed, clad in a paint-stained dark-coloured robe, a few stripes of green and pink on his cheek and forehead.

"Welcome!" Zak cries when he sees Darryl, though he frowns at seeing Clay and Nick. "I was under the impression you were coming alone."

"Oh, uh, well," Darryl looks guilty. "I mean, they decided to tag along, you know, since it must be interesting, watching an artist working on their craft!"

Nice save there. Clay nods, a little too vigorously for his liking. Zak seems to contemplate this, then shrugs. "Come on in!"

The house has a minimalist feel to it, with barely anything on the shelves and walls, unlike what Clay would have expected an artist's house to look like. No painting or sculpture in sight. He isn't sure what he's been expecting, really. Maybe a bizarre Picasso piece, or the classic van Gogh's painting of sunflowers. Zak leads them up the rickety stairs, creaking floorboards, and into a rundown room filled with so many colours that it makes Clay dizzy.

They end up sitting at the side - Nick and himself, that is - while Darryl attempts to pose to the best of his ability. Zak doesn't seem to mind, shifting his gaze from his canvas to his model, with the intensity of an artist in his element. Clay doesn't know enough about art to comment about the way he moves his brush, the way he uses the colours and all, but damn, does the work-in-progress look good.

"This is boring," Floris says, wriggling out of Clay's bag and leaping to the floor. "I'm going for a walk."

"Don't get caught," Clay says, continuing to scroll through his Twitter.

*

"God, I can't do it!" Zak cries, dropping his palette to the ground. "It's just not coming to me!"

"Not coming to you?" Darryl asks. "What do you mean?"

"I found my muse, but I just can't paint anything," Zak says, sighing. "Look, sorry for inviting you all the way down here, but-"

"Wait. Wait, wait, wait," Clay says, holding out a hand. "We have questions."

Zak gives them a deadpan look and does a shooing motion. "Sorry, but I'm a busy man. Move along now." He turns to Darryl with a bright grin. "You, on the other hand, can stay for as long as you want."

"What is this preferential treatment," Nick mutters.

"Look, we did not just sit here for hours on end to watch you paint and just give up and-" Clay starts, standing abruptly.

"Whoa there," Zak says. "You guys came in, uninvited, into our house..."

"We came in *uninvited*?" Clay roars.

Darryl shoots Clay a glare and gestures for him to zip his mouth. "Look, I really apologise for my friends. They're uncouth rogues who ought to keep their foul mouths shut."

Now Darryl is just capitalizing on this opportunity to attack them. Well, it appears to be working, because Zak has now turned back to Darryl with sparkles in his eyes, almost like a puppy dog begging for its master's attention.

"But we would like to ask you whether your works were being plagiarized by your master, Miss Marion."

"Plagiarized?" The elation vanishes from Zak's face. "Definitely not. I offer my ideas up to her of my own free will. You know, these questions are kinda offensive, especially since you know nothing about our situation. Besides, you are slandering my Master with baseless rumours."

"Baseless rumours?" Nick shoves his hands into his pockets.

"She takes pupils in and puts a roof over their head. It is an act of charity," Zak says, removing his robe and dropping it to the ground, pooling at his feet as he moves the canvas to the corner of the room. "Seriously, man, don't-"

"That painting I saw at the exhibit," Darryl says, in a quieter voice this time. "You painted it, didn't you?"

Zak narrows his eyes, but says nothing. Instead, he picks his palette from the ground and places it in the sink, along with his brushes.

"Are you really okay with this?" Nick asks.

Zak pulls out his phone, its surface also splattered with paint. "You leave me with no choice. I'm reporting you to the police."

"Reporting us?" Clay raises his voice. "You gotta be-"

"Not Darryl, of course," Zak says (the same moment Darryl splutters, "Since when were we on a first-name basis?"). "The two of you. I don't remember ever inviting either of you, so I'm gonna report you to the police for unlawful entry."

"This is bullshit!" Nick shouts.

"Stop it!" Darryl snaps. He turns to Zak. "What could we possibly do to stop you from doing that?"

Zak has this absolutely devious expression that flashes across his face for just an instant, and it is then that Clay realizes that he's not going to request for anything...particularly good for them. "I would like Darryl to continue being my model."

"But it wasn't working..." Darryl starts.

"I was being modest for your sake," Zak says. "But!" He holds up a finger. "If you agree to bare everything to me, then I will put all my effort into creating the *best* nude painting *ever*!"

["YOU WHAT?"](#) Clay and Nick bellow.

"Those are my terms," Zak says with a leer. "So, what say you?"

"I...um..."

"Alright, time out," Clay says, holding up a "T" sign. "This is a *nude* painting you're talking about. Mind if you give us a few days to think it over?"

"Of course. Take your time. Just come before Master's exhibit ends," Zak says, looking awfully relaxed. "I'll be waiting for you to contact me, cutie." He blows a kiss Darryl's way.

"Damn, he got us good," Nick says, opening the door to leave, only to find Floris seated outside.

"Huh? Is he done with the whole model thing?"

"You *idiot*!" Nick cries.

"Did you bring some manner of animal into my home as well?" Zak turns around from where he is washing the palette at the sink.

"Wait, what? Ow! Yeow! My goddamn *ear*!"

The foursome hurriedly leave.

*

[5/19 - TUESDAY - EVENING](#)

"God, this *sucks*! Fucking piece of shit, who does he think he is?" Nick complains, all while Darryl looks too lost in thought to even respond, nibbling listlessly at a chocolate chip muffin.

"Okay, first things first," Floris says, "we cannot let Darryl sacrifice his honour. Guys, he's thinking of submitting his artwork to his Master to be used in her next few exhibits, so there's a high chance that *that* nude painting is going to make it in one of them."

"Oh hell no!" Nick cries, curled up on his bed. Clay clasps his fingers behind his head, legs up on the desk.

"Exactly," Floris says. "Anyone's got an idea of how to do that?"

"Well, that Zak guy's not exactly willing to admit his Master's in the wrong," Clay says. "He's like, 'no, my Master is the best thing in the world'."

"Yeah, well, maybe he's got some kinda complex or something," Floris says dismissively.

"Honestly, who cares about him?"

"He's the one who's gonna report us to the police if I don't model nude for him." Darryl's voice cracks oddly at the end.

Floris falls silent. "Good point. What's the deadline, by the way?"

"The exhibit ends on June sixth," Nick says. "That doesn't give us a lot of time."

"No, it doesn't," Floris says. "Okay, um..." He thinks for a while. "Let us put that on hold for now. Clay, can you boot up the Meta-Nav?"

Clay does as he is told.

"Let's check whether this Marion woman has a Palace first," Floris says.

Name: Isabelle Marion.

"Okay, I got a hit," Clay says as the world pulses around them.

"So she *does* have a Palace," Nick says. "So, what's the location and the distortion?"

"She said she lives in a...a humble shack or something, right?" Clay says. "Remember that interview?"

"Really?" Nick scratches his head, propping himself up on his elbows. "Can't say I do. But we could try that, yeah."

Clay pumps his fist in the air when the Meta-Nav reacts again. Now, they're just left with the distortion part. Krones' was a castle, so what could Marion's be?

"Maybe it's got something to do with artists," Floris says.

"An artist...hmm? How about art gallery?" Nick tries.

Nothing.

"Exhibit?" Clay suggests.

Also nothing.

"Museum," Darryl says, and the Meta-Nav reacts once more.

"Beginning navigation."

It doesn't feel like anything has changed, other than the fact that the world seems a little bleaker than usual. Nick glances out the window, then scrambles off his bed, nearly crushing Floris in the process. Clay follows his gaze, mouth agape when he sees a shining beacon of light in the distance, a patch of shimmering gold against the darkness of the night sky.

"Is that..." Darryl starts, also looking away from the camera.

"Yeah, it is," Floris says, leaping onto the window sill. "That's Marion's Palace, alright. All the way at Lancer Lane."

"So that means her heart is twisted, right?" Nick asks.

Floris nods. "You know what I think? I think that we should infiltrate her Palace as soon as

possible. From what we've seen, she's been plagiarizing her students' work and abusing them, kicking them out when they no longer provide her their artwork."

"Fine by me," Clay says, spinning about in the chair. "What do you guys think?"

There is a chorus of agreements to meet up on Friday to check out her Palace. Floris assures Darryl that if they manage to steal Marion's heart before her exhibit ends, then it is unlikely that he would have to pose nude for Zak. Darryl logs off, leaving Clay staring at the Skype call screen. Nick has slumped back into his bed. Clay heads to the bathroom to answer the call of nature before bed, but the matter weighs heavily on his mind.

Museum of Vanity: Infiltration Begin

Chapter Summary

infiltration begins in the museum of vanity

Chapter Notes

hi im back i just bought xenoblade chronicles

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

5/20 - WEDNESDAY - LUNCHTIME

"Hey, the exam results are out."

"Oh? How did you do?"

Clay dips his head, hiding his face in his hoodie, trying to speak to Darryl over the din of their classmates' chatter. "I don't wanna know."

"You probably did fine," Darryl says. "Come on, let's go check it out."

Their results are posted on the school bulletin board on the first floor, near the cafeteria where Nick is already standing, a dark expression on his face. Clay gulps.

Darryl cheers, for himself, Clay must add, and Clay's heart sinks to the pit of his stomach.

He passed everything besides Literature. Goodness gracious, his math grades are at the top but his Literature leaves something to be desired. It's not that he would get kicked out if he failed just one subject, but God, that is a serious blow to his ego.

"It's fine, bro," Nick says, patting his back. "It's fine."

Naturally, Nick and Darryl are ranked way higher than he is. Clay laments his life decisions as they head to the cafeteria for lunch.

5/20 - WEDNESDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"Do you want to go somewhere?"

Clay looks up quizzically from where he's answering messages in the break room. Today had been hectic, but when has it not been?

"I thought you worked at Starbucks after this?" Clay asks, though it must have been the wrong thing to say; Ruby's crestfallen expression speaks volumes.

"I...I did," Ruby says. "I got laid off. Said I made too many mistakes. So, I'm free tonight." She chuckles sadly and coughs into her hand. "So, uh, do you want to walk in the park with me?"

Clay stands, shoving his phone into his pocket. Nick and his crossword puzzle can wait. He lets Floris climb into his bag, the fox perking up at Ruby's compliment of his sleek fur (he looks like a stray, though, in Clay's opinion), and they set off for the park.

The park in question is quite large, with a lake smack in the middle, a tiny shack at the edge where an old man rents boats out. Ruby finds a bench and sits down, her hands on her lap. Clay settles down beside her, one leg swung over the other. The park is peaceful at this hour, with no signs of the stresses and anxiety of the city, a break in the busyness of the daily struggle to survive.

Ruby sneezes.

"Bless you."

Ruby smiles, reaching for a pack of tissue paper and wiping her nose with it. "Sorry, let me put on my jacket." She digs out a threadbare jacket from her handbag, barely large enough to fit her. The sleeves are too short, ending mid-forearm, and the hem of her jacket barely comes down to her stomach. The cold breeze whistles along, and Ruby shivers.

Clay glances around, noticing a stand for hot dogs. He strides over and orders two, dumping as much mustard and ketchup as is even possible. It earned him the glare of the shopkeeper, but Clay ignores him and heads back to where Ruby is sitting, handing her one.

"I...How much is it?" Ruby asks, holding the steaming hot dog in her hands, flinching when she bites down on it. Clay laughs, taking extra caution around the scorching hot dog.

"Don't worry about it."

"But I have to-"

"I'm treating you as a friend."

Ruby stares down at the hot dog bun, hesitantly taking another bite. "Thank you...Sorry about that. You have to pay for me...because I suggested to come here..."

"It's no big deal," Clay says.

"It is," Ruby snaps hotly. She trembles, whether from the cold or from the frustration radiating from her. "I'm sorry, I just...I don't like asking people for help."

"I can see that. But it's not a bad thing, you know."

"Yeah, thanks," Ruby says, falling silent and eating her hot dog. They spend the rest of the time staring at the lake, watching the water ripple and ducks swimming through the water. Ruby is smiling and thanking him again when they leave, and Clay feels just a little closer to her.

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[5/20 - WEDNESDAY - EVENING](#)

"Clay. I heard you failed a test."

Clay stops, a hand on the knob, as he watches Mrs Armstrong type furiously into her laptop. She does not even raise her head to acknowledge his presence. The awkward silence is deafening.

"I...uh..." Clay glances at Nick seated at the couch, who shakes his head adamantly.

"Don't blame my son," Mrs Armstrong says. "Since you're on probation, your academics are closely monitored by the school. I received an email this afternoon. Granted that you are strong in some areas, though painfully weak in others, I have decided to hire a tutor."

A tutor? For his dismal Literature grade? Fair enough.

"He will be coming in every Sunday evening, starting this week, at least until your Literature grade improves. You may go up to your room now. Nick, don't forget to wash the dishes."

"Yes, mom."

Mrs Armstrong goes back to her work immediately after. Clay sighs. He hopes this tutor is nice and not super strict. Clay decides to take her advice and head up to his room, deciding to do some homework before bed.

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[5/21 - THURSDAY - AFTER SCHOOL](#)

"It takes so long to get here," Nick complains. They are standing outside Marion's shack, with Clay activating the Meta-Nav, tapping on the bookmarked "Museum of Vanity".

Like magic, the Museum springs up from the ground, covered in gold plating, complete with Shadows for security guards and a long queue of cognitive people waiting to get into the museum. Her name in gold, block letters hang overhead: Marion's Museum. The Money Is Mine. What a horrible exhibit title. Sapnap approaches the line of cognitive beings, but they don't seem to notice, only droning on about how Marion's art is revolutionary and how it's going to change the way the world views art.

"Alright," Fundy says. "Let's get in."

"Get in? We're going to have to queue?" Sapnap asks.

"No, you dumbass," Fundy says. ("Language!") He clears his throat. "What kind of Phantom Thief goes through the front door?"

"Besides, if we go in that way, we're gonna run into a bunch of Shadows," Dream points out. "Let's find another way in."

They scale the giant wall boxing the museum in, finding themselves in a garden of sorts, Shadow guards roaming about the area. Stealthily, Dream darts from one partition to the next, from one sculpture to another, bypassing all the Shadows and finding an emergency ladder that he begins to ascend. Sapnap, Fundy and Bad are right behind him.

Dream reaches the rooftop, and to his delight, finds a skylight slightly ajar. He opens it, wincing at the creak, and jumps in, landing quietly on a woolly rug. The interior of the museum is as gaudy as the exterior, potted plants placed at every corner, portraits hung up on the walls, depicting people of all sizes and colour, the images swirling, slightly shifting. The portraits are just...uncanny, as if they are really humans trapped within.

They venture through the halls, rather surprised at the lack of Shadows - though it is not unwelcome, observing the wavy portraits, rippling when touched.

"Hold up," Sapnap says, pausing in front of a painting. "Isn't this guy Nevada?"

Dream, Bad and Fundy gather around him, staring at the painting. Just like the others, it moves like there's a thin film of water between them. But there is no mistaking that smiling face and glasses. That man is Norbert Nevada, a student of Marion. A chill runs up Dream's spine. What is a portrait of Nevada doing here? Carefully, they enter through to the next area, where there are several Shadows stalking around.

"Be careful," Fundy says, gesturing to the doorway. Two strips of red, barely visible to the naked eye, run across the breadth of the doorway. Laser traps. If they trigger one, the Shadows would be on them in seconds. Dream hops over the lasers and presses himself flush against a panel lined with portraits, the same kinds as the ones they've been seeing.

"Dream, look up," Bad whispers.

Dream does, glancing over only to see a portrait of a person who looks like Zak, the resemblance uncanny. Even the nameplate below the portrait has his name engraved.

"This is Zak, isn't it?" Fundy says, tapping the painting. As usual, the painting ripples upon contact.

"Seems to be that way," Sapnap says. "Does this mean that he sees them as nothing more than paintings?"

Nothing more than paintings hung on the wall, with no other purpose than to bring in the cash.

"Hey, what are you doing here?"

Dream snaps to attention, but it's too late, as he is unable to avoid a whack to the head by a baton. He slams hard to the ground, and Fundy manages to deflect the Shadow's next swing. The Shadow grunts, bursting into black mass which rises to give a fairy in a cheongsam, wings tinged with red, yellow flowers in her hair. The next moment, the room becomes sweltering, and Dream leaps back just in time to dodge a pillar of fire shooting up from beneath his feet.

Dream summons Berith to take the next stream of flames, whipping his gun out from its holster and putting a few bullets through Hua Po's wings. The fairy tumbles from the air with a terrible shriek. Just then, Bad shouts, throwing out fireballs of his own at an army of bearded wood spirits, sizzling them to crisps.

"You bastards," Hua Po hisses through gritted teeth. Sapnap, Fundy and Dream have their guns trained on her.

"Some money would be nice," Dream says, twirling his gun in his hands. "And maybe you can throw it a little present for us and we'll let you go."

Hua Po scatters a generous amount of money on the ground, coins that the rest of them make no move to pick up. Dream can hardly describe the satisfaction coursing through him at the face of horror of the Hua Po before he holds up a hand, initiating a hail of bullets that dissolve the fairy into a cloud of ash.

"Well, that could have gone better," Dream says, holstering his gun, careful not to touch the barrel. With the immediate threat gone, he goes back to examining the portraits. The most obvious conclusion here would be the one that Sapnap has reached, that Marion sees her pupils as a source of revenue, that in her mind, she does not even consider them living beings.

"All the more we have to change her heart," Fundy says. "Come on, let's go. Watch out for the lasers."

*

"Look at the size of this," Sappnap says, gesturing to a large statue sculpted from gold smack in the middle of a lobby. He and Fundy have gone on ahead to scout out the area, while Dream and Bad are busy poring over a map they found near an information counter. The lobby is deserted, not a single Shadow in sight. Coupled with the fact that there is a lounge complete with a large enough coffee table to spread their map out on, it's the prime location to use as a base for now.

"So, we're here," Bad says, pointing to a room labelled: "1F Lobby". "And Sappnap and Fundy are checking this area out." He slides his finger along the piece of paper, towards a large circular room with that golden statue. "There's another gallery here, and then an exhibition room upstairs that leads to a garden." He frowns. "The map ends there though. There isn't any fancy place where it seems like the Treasure can be."

"Then maybe there's another map lying around somewhere, like there was in Krones' Castle," Dream says. Bad rolls it up and tucks it into his cloak. "We'll continue on for now and see whether we can find it."

"Guys," Fundy calls from the other room. "You done?"

Dream and Bad run up to the waiting duo, and they head down the laser-filled corridor that opens up to the next exhibition chamber.

The exhibition chamber is filled with paintings, though not of people, but of familiar portraits and landscape that Dream remembers seeing in the art exhibition they went through. That same singer with her microphone, the same flock of birds flying overhead in a V-shaped formation, the same rolling hills and swaying grass. The only difference is that these paintings move slightly.

The moment Sappnap, the last person of their team, sets foot into the chamber, electric fences crackle to life behind them, blocking both their entrance and exit. The sound of Shadows bursting to life alerts Dream of the situation they are now in. Lasers spring up, casting barely-visible reddish glows like cobwebs in the room, strung from one end to the other.

"Oh, this is bad," Fundy mumbles. Dream glances around. There is a fixture just above their heads, though they would have to bypass a lot of lasers to get there without triggering the alarm...

"Dream!" Sappnap shouts.

Dream draws his dagger, spinning on his heels fast enough to meet the Shadow's giant mallet in a clash of steel. The Ippon-Datara roars, booming voice muffled from beneath its headgear. It draws its mallet back once more, giving Dream time to summon Slime, the mallet crashing into Slime's amorphous body, taking the blow like a champ.

Sappnap and the others have their own enemies to contend with. A woman in a flowing dress, a straw hat perched on her head, waves her fan, sending a volley of blue spheres at them, hitting the panels, taking out some of the lasers as the blue spheres smash and crush them, rendering them useless and nothing more than a heap of scrap metal.

Wait. That would work.

The Ame-no-Uzume continues firing a series of Frei spheres, one or two brushing Clay's arm, singeing his coat, burning his skin. Dream hisses, summoning Jack Frost and mending his burn in a

glow of green light.

"Hey! Over here!" Dream shouts, waving his hands and catching the Ame-no-Uzume's attention. Dream ducks, dodging the blow from the swing from the Ippon-Datara still pursuing him, lifting a foot, the Frei sphere narrowly missing him.

"What are you doing?" Bad cries, throwing out a hand, building a wall of fire between Dream and the Ippon-Datara. The Frei spheres dissolve when they hit the fire wall.

Dream closes his fingers around the Ender Pearl in his coat pocket and hurls the Pearl in an arc through the air, small enough to soar past the gaps in the laser security, landing on the rug. Dream blinks, and he is now right in the path of a stray Frei sphere. He rolls to the side, the Frei sphere blasting the ground where he just stood. He glances behind him, finding that the laser machinery is inches behind him. If he can just command the attention of the Ame-no-Uzume...

"Come and get me!"

He must have attracted the Ame-no-Uzume's reaction, which is good, but the Ame-no-Uzume seems to be more focused on fighting Sapnap and Fundy at the moment, which is not so good. Yeah. Why attack someone so far away when they are under assault from someone right in front of them? Dream grits his teeth, cogs whirring in his brain.

"Sapnap!"

"Yeah? I'm a little busy here!" Sapnap deflects a blow from the Ippon-Datara. Bad finally takes it out with a shot from his submachine gun, the Ippon-Datara bursting into ash.

"Hit it towards me!"

"What?" Sapnap yells. "Are you fucking crazy?"

"Just do it, Sapnap!"

No objection, nothing. Full trust. Full trust between himself and Sapnap evident in the way Sapnap glares at the barrage of blue balls once more fired in their direction, steels himself and bats the balls as fast and as hard as he can in Dream's direction.

Dream leaps out of the way as soon as the Frei spheres explode behind him. The machinery buzzes and crackles, the laser barrier blocking their exit blinking off, allowing them to continue on forward.

"Ender Pearls, out, now!" Dream calls.

The group follows Dream's example, hurling their Pearls past the significantly-larger holes between the web of lasers. They land right at the doorway where the lasers disappeared and dash along after Dream. Blue balls sail past their heads, crashing into walls, into vases and couches, ripping holes in the rug and wallpaper.

"Wow, that was pretty smart of you," Fundy says. Dream grins, throwing open the door to a safe room, slamming the door shut when all of them are in.

[The](#) sound of heavy panting is predominant in the room as the foursome try to catch their breath. Sapnap has collapsed on the couch, whining about Dream having shaved ten years off his life, while Bad is just glad that he's alive. Dream removes his mask, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

"Okay, the Shadows are getting way stronger," Sapnap says. "We need better weapons. I think my pipe is breaking."

"Yeah, I think that'll be best for us," Fundy says. "Maybe we should pay that Phil guy a visit when we're next in Valentine."

They rest for a few moments, Dream taking the time to fill up his probation diary. To be honest, he isn't sure what he should write. Today, I infiltrated a golden museum with my friends and battled mythical beings with my own special power.

I went to gardening club today since it was a Thursday. Great, that should satisfy the authorities. He shoves the phone back into his coat pocket and turns to the rest. They're a little injured, a little tired, but the determination in their faces cannot be contested. Fundy has marked the location of the safe room on the map. Bad opens the door a crack, beckoning them over when he has confirmed that the coast is clear.

Next up, another exhibition gallery just above this one.

Chapter End Notes

Charm +3 (working at convenience store)

Sun arcana rank 4 -> 5

Knowledge +3 (doing homework)

Museum of Vanity: Infiltration Middle

Chapter Summary

a little of a short chapter since the group encounters a roadblock

Chapter Notes

i have decided to write skephalo romantically

5/21 - THURSDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

Luckily for them, the exhibition hall is empty, walls on both sides covered by thin curtains that stretch from the ceiling to the ground. This hall, if it can even be called that, houses only one exhibit: a sparkling vase glimmering with an ethereal glow on a marble pedestal.

"Hey, why're you guys running past it like that?" Fundy cries, stopping in front of the vase, stars in his eyes.

"Uh, because it's obviously a trap?" Sapnap says, pausing at the doorway, the most incredulous expression on his face. "Dude, I'm not even that smart and I can tell you that."

"What kind of Phantom Thief would we be if we ignored something as...as...sparkly as this? Come on, it's gonna be worth a lot of money!"

"Fundy, I have a bad feeling-" Bad starts, but Fundy ignores him, leaping onto the vase, wrapping his tiny fox body around it. God, if Dream doesn't know better, he'd think Fundy is drunk.

"Get back!" Dream shouts, doing a backflip and landing right outside the cage of lasers that spring up out of nowhere, trapping everyone else in with the vase.

"You *muffinhead*!"

Fundy scrambles to get off the vase, as if he has regained some semblance of sobriety. "Shit! I'm sorry!"

"Sorry's not gonna cut it, you damn fox!"

"Language!"

Dream sighs, a palm against his forehead. He's the only one outside of that laser cage, so it's up to him to get them out of it. At this rate, however, they're just going to attract more and more Shadows to their location. He's got to find the switch, fast.

Come to think of it, he *did* see an unmanned command room when they turned that corner, right before this exhibit. The switch to disable the trap should be there. At least, that's what Dream's telling himself.

"Wait here," Dream says. "I'll be right back."

"Yeah, not like we can go anywhere else anyway," Sapnap says, leaning against the vase's pedestal.

Dream finds his way to the command room, the doors sliding open with no hassle at all. As expected, it is empty. Most monitors are switched off, with the exception of one, a red light blinking against the sky blue wallpaper. Dream plops himself down into the plush rolling chair, examining the pop-up window. Okay, so to disable the lasers, they need a password? What kind of password? This is the kind of thing that a high-ranking Shadow would have, isn't it?

The sudden sound of voices snaps Dream from his trance, and as they get louder and louder, accompanied by the thump of heavy-heeled boots, Dream shoves himself under the table, curled up beneath the computer.

"You think your lame ass trap caught the intruders?"

"It has to! Those are thieves we're talking about. True blue thieves would stop at nothing to get their filthy hands on gold!"

Well, they're probably right about Fundy, at least, but Dream is *not* a filthy thief.

"So, uh, what's the password again?"

"Hello."

"Huh?"

Dream snickers.

"Zero-seven-seven-three-four," the second Shadow says. "That spells 'hello' upside down."

"You lame-are those...? They are! They're the thieves! We caught them!"

Dream almost hits his head scrabbling to get to the keyboard, keying in the password as quickly as possible. Zero-seven-seven-three-four! He slams the Enter key and yells "Yes!" when a new window pops up, informing him that the lasers are disabled. He glances out through a tiny window, which has a full view of the exhibition room. Sapnap, Bad and Fundy are already engaging in combat with the transformed Shadows. Dream sneaks out of the command room and readies his pistol, drilling bullets through the Shadows, striking down a few Hua Po fairies who drop to the ground like flies.

"There was another one!" one of the Shadows shouts, screaming cut off when Fundy stabs it through the chest, ash scattering before their eyes. Sapnap and Bad finishes the rest off with coordinated blasts of electricity and fire.

"I thought we were gonna die there," Bad says, leaning against the vase pedestal. He rounds on Fundy. "What were you thinking, you muffinhead?"

Fundy blinks. "Did you just call me a muffinhead?"

"That's not the point here!"

Fundy has got to keep his gold-mongering desires in check, or else he's not going to last long in this business. Still, it's strange that Fundy would express interest at this particular vase. Sure, it's shinier

than other exhibits they've seen, but it's not something that he should have gotten so excited about. Dream taps it. At the third tap, a demon bursts from the vase like genie from a lamp. Shocking yellow eyes glare at them as it sways. Immediately, the Phantom Thieves draw their weapons.

"It's a Treasure Demon!" Fundy says. "Quick, you have that Treasure Trap, right, Dream?"

Dream fumbles with the net woven from silver string, which Phoenix SC taught him to make. He hurls it at the Shadow, the Shadow hardly flinching when the net slices it in a million pieces, scattering gems - diamonds, emeralds - everywhere. The net lands on the ground, electricity zapping through it, the silver string glowing red.

"Holy shit, we're rich," Sappap says, squatting down and examining the diamonds.

"Yeah, Treasure Demons are basically made of jewels, so getting rid of one with the Treasure Trap can net us a lot of money," Fundy says. "Although, I'd be careful if I were you."

"Hmm?" Dream asks, still shoving as many diamonds and emeralds as it is possible into his bulging coat pockets. Perhaps he can sell these to the weapon shop guy. Phil seems pretty chill about everything.

"Sometimes, Treasure Demons aren't the only things coming out of these jars and stuff," Fundy says. "I saw Creepers before."

"Creepers?" Bad asks.

Fundy stands at the doorway to the next area, waiting for them to finish gathering up the remaining coins and dollar bills. "No one knows what they do in there, but they sometimes appear instead of Treasure Demons and just blow up in your face." He stares at the ground, touching his whiskers absently. "Trust me on this one."

Once they're done (the floor is spick and span), they head onwards past the next hallway, also booby-trapped with lasers. Right in front of them is a safe room, the distorted door's existence wavering and rippling. To their right, the only way forward, is a golden door with a knob, a fantastic design of gold, silver and bronze feathers painted onto it. Two rows of bamboo plants flank the door.

Dream twists the knob, and the door opens. However, pure disappointment waits for them on the other side. Zigzagging lasers cover the entirety of the indoor garden. Even if they somehow manage to avoid all the lasers, there is a ceiling-to-floor electrical fence that they have to contend with. It's purely impossible to head on past this impediment.

"Now what? We're stuck," Sappap says, leaning against the closed door.

"Maybe," Fundy says cryptically, tilting his head. "The thing is, I saw something just like this before, back when I was exploring Marion's house. There was a door with the same design on it."

"So, uh, what's that mean, exactly?" Dream asks.

"You know how this Palace essentially reflects Marion's mind? So what all these lasers and, uh, electrical fence mean is that she's protecting very strongly whatever lies behind this door," Fundy says, tapping on the door with the magnificent design. "And if we can show her that we can get past this door, then it's likely that the lasers and electrical fence would deactivate as well."

"What's the plan, then?" Bad asks.

"What Fundy is saying is that we have to show Marion herself that the door is not impregnable," Dream concludes. Fundy nods approvingly.

"Pretty much," Fundy says. "Unfortunately for us, last I checked, there was a giant padlock on her door."

Sapnap groans. "Then that plan's busted?"

"Don't worry," Fundy says, grinning wide. "You can leave that lock to me. The hard part is getting Marion to see the open door."

Sapnap walks up to Bad solemnly, and places a hand on his shoulder. "It's all up to you now, Bad."

"It's what?" Bad stares at Sapnap as if he's grown two heads.

Dream smirks. "Yeah, Bad. Good luck."

"Huh?"

"Let's get back to the safe room," Fundy says, trying hard to conceal his grin. "We can talk more outside."

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5/21 - THURSDAY - EVENING

"Absolutely *not*!"

Darryl's face is so red, from mortification, frustration or embarrassment, Clay isn't sure. Sapnap chomps on his Subway cookie while Dream feeds bits of ham to Floris. Clay watches as a piece of lettuce falls from Darryl's sandwich onto the wrapper below. Eyes not leaving Darryl's clenched fingers, he gingerly pinches the piece of lettuce and crunches into it.

"Five bucks," Darryl says, glaring at Clay. "Five bucks for stealing my lettuce."

"That's overpriced."

"Whatever happened to protecting my honour?" Darryl turns to Floris this time.

"It's not like you're *actually* gonna do it," Nick says, sucking the crumbs off his fingers. "It's just, you kinda need to infiltrate the house, and this plan is the best we've got."

"I'll be there the whole time too," Fundy says. "So if anything bad happens, you can be sure I'll protect you!" He puts on the most innocent smile on his face. Clay can literally see the homicidal thoughts forming in Darryl's brain.

"You just need to stall him till Marion returns," Clay says. "During that time, Fundy will try to unlock the padlock, then you have to lead Marion towards the door."

"What if she doesn't come back?" Darryl groans, pinching the bridge of his nose. "What if I can't stall for so long? I'm not a good actor!"

"Just be yourself," Clay says.

"Easy for you to say." Darryl lets out the longest sigh ever, then mumbles something unintelligible.

"What's that?" Nick asks, reaching towards Darryl's cookie. Darryl moves as fast as lightning, slamming Nick's hand onto the table with the loudest slap that Clay has ever heard in his life. Nick grimaces, and Darryl fixes him with the scariest look in his eye. He doesn't even seem to notice the sheer number of customers that have turned to stare at them. Clay curls in on himself, nibbling at his cookie.

"I'll fucking do it. And don't make me repeat myself."

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5/22 - FRIDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"Okay, let's go over the plan once again," Floris says. "You guys will wait by the garden with the lasers. And Darryl, you'll be distracting Zak."

"I guess," Darryl says, a hand on his nape.

"I'll be picking the lock, so I'll come find you when I'm done. When we manage to get Marion to see that the door is open, the lasers would disappear automatically. But, you guys have to find a way to disable them for good," Floris says. Clay fishes a lockpick he crafted the day before and flicks it at Floris, the fox catching it between its fangs. "Awight, leggo! Moob oup, people!"

Floris hides in Darryl's hood, lockpick clutched firmly in his jaw, and despite Darryl's bold strides, Clay can almost see the slight tremors in his shoulders, the apprehension in his gait.

He's definitely going to treat Darryl to a Wilton buffet if they manage to pull this off.

Nick unlocks his phone and activates the Meta-Nav. "Well? What are we waiting for?"

Clay surrenders to the shifting and wavering of the world, and finds himself in his Metaverse outfit once again, the green cloak falling past his calves, the familiar dagger and pistol on his belt. The comforting whispers of the Personas he harbours. With Nick beside him, they head into the museum.

*

5/22 - FRIDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"Ah, I didn't expect you to reply so soon. You make me really happy, Darryl!"

"I didn't know we were on a first-name basis."

"Oh, but now you do," Zak says, clicking his tongue. "So, Darryl, just assume whatever pose you like!"

Darryl clutches the strap of his bag, knuckles turning white. Floris entered the house after Darryl did through the ajar door, scampering down a corridor where Darryl presumed the weird door is. Darryl sighs, placing his bag on the ground, against the doorjamb. He can *feel* Zak's eyes on him, *roving* up and down him, while he shrugs off his hoodie, the article of clothing tossed at his bag.

"You're not filming, are you?" Darryl says, looking around at the corners of the room, at potential places where cameras could be hidden.

"You don't trust me?"

Darryl gives him a look. "Frankly speaking, no."

Zak clutches his chest. "Ow. You really know how to hurt someone."

"I consider it one of my stronger points."

"Ooh, feisty," Zak says, wagging his brows. He drops his voice, a hint of professionalism in his tone. "Although, I can assure you that there are no hidden cameras here."

Darryl narrows his eyes at him. *Stall him*. Floris isn't here yet, and neither is Marion.

"Just wondering, when is your master coming back?"

"I could lock the door if you're self-conscious."

"Lock? This rusty old thing?" Darryl says, gesturing to the knob, the metal coating peeled and stained with rust. "Why don't we go somewhere with a...with a lock that's more secure?"

"A lock that's more secure? Well, I guess I can probably get a better painting if my muse is comfortable," Zak says, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. He then snaps his fingers, features lighting up as an idea pops into his head. Darryl can only pray that this new idea does not compromise his safety or, well, honour. Where in the world is Floris?

"My bedroom's just down the-" Zak yelps, clutching at his face. Darryl's knuckles sting as he withdraws his arm.

"Oh, sorry, my hand slipped."

"That hurt," Zak sniffs. "Alright, alright, I was just joking." Zak nurses his bruise.

"Hmm, let's find a place where I'm comfortable, then," Darryl says, wrenching the knob and throwing the door open. He strides out of the room, Zak following behind him. Maybe he'd be lucky and he'd find Floris done...hmm...Darryl vaguely remembers seeing Floris run down this way...

"Hey, my master will be back soon," Zak says. "So, uh, it would really help if you'd, um, hurry it up?"

Darryl ignores him and continues walking down the corridor, turning ahead, only to find Floris still struggling with the lock, paws ill-suited to deal with the intricacies of picking a lock.

"You're not done?" Darryl hisses.

"I'm trying!" Floris hisses.

"Hey, we're not allowed to come here," Zak says, scratching his head. "Only my master..."

"It's open!" Floris cries, landing on the ground and tossing the lockpick aside.

"Is that a fox?" Zak tries to peer behind Darryl's shoulder, but Darryl shoves him back. Where the hell is Marion? Why's she not here yet? Zak said she'd be back soon...

["Zak?"](#) Zak, are you there?"

The panic that flickers across Zak's face doesn't escape Darryl's notice. Sure, hurried footsteps ring out through the din of silence. Zak glances behind him, and Darryl seizes his chance. Just as

Marion's head pokes around the corner, Darryl grabs Zak's arm and drags him inside, stumbling, into the pitch-blackness, yelling and spluttering. Floris scurries into the room.

*

5/22 - FRIDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"It's open!"

Dream is the first to rush past the interior garden, hyper aware that the lasers may start blinking on any second. Thankfully, they don't, and with Sapnap right at his heels, Dream rushes into the first room he sees, the automatic glass door opening upon his approach. There is only one Shadow there, manning the only computer with several monitors at his disposal.

"What are you doing here? How did you get here?" the Shadow leaps to his feet, baton at the ready. Dream has already summoned his Persona, Onmoraki, a stream of fireballs launched at the Shadow.

The Shadow deflects the fireballs with its baton, morphing into its jelly-like state, before rising as a lion figure, a white mane ending right below its shoulder, black stripes covering its yellow body. Its snake for a tail hisses, forked tongue slipping in and out of its mouth.

"You filthy Thieves!"

There it is again. *Filthy* Thieves. For the last time...

"I'm not A FUCKING FILTHY THIEF YOU ASSHOLE!"

Thank goodness Bad isn't here to reprimand him. Onmoraki looses another series of fireballs at the Nue. Nue screeches, falling over, and Sapnap dances behind him, barrel of his shotgun aimed at the Nue's head.

With one shot, the Nue disappears into dust.

Dream steps over the ash on the ground, dropping himself into the seat by the computer and clicks "Disable Lasers" option on the flashing window. Immediately, the electrical fences disappear, the laser machinery winds down and deactivates, the jarring red light switched off. With that, they'll be able to pass through this garden whenever they'd like.

Now it's time to get back to meet up with Bad and Fundy.

*

5/22 - FRIDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

The light flickers on with no delay, Marion standing at the doorway. There was a flush of anger on her face for merely a second, but she hides it easily, clearing her throat and walking up to them.

"You are not supposed to be here, you know," Marion says. "Zak, what is the meaning of this?"

Zak isn't responding. His mouth is open, eyes wide, as he takes in the sight. Plenty of canvasses are spread out, the exact same painting depicted on each of them, of a mother smiling at a sea of clouds, a branch of cherry blossoms behind her against a ochre background. Darryl has never seen such a benevolent expression painted so beautifully, so full of emotion before. Just what is this mother smiling at?

"You...Master..." Zak whirls around, Darryl completely forgotten. "What is this?" He gestures to the paintings around him. "These are replicas?"

Marion's brow twitches. "Yes, they are replicas! I told you, Zak, I had been suffering from an art block."

"But that doesn't explain anything, Master!" Zak whirls around to stare at her, a burst of rage behind that intense gaze. "What were you doing with these replicas?"

Marion sighs, leaning against the doorjamb. Darryl narrows his eyes.

"You see, Zak, an artist must do what they need to survive, even if I had to dabble a little in...illegal activities."

"Illegal activities? You are *selling* these? This is the Sylvaria, Master!" Zak cries. "You claimed that the original painting was *stolen*!"

Stolen?

"Indeed it was," Marion says. "That's why I-"

"That doesn't make sense," Darryl says, stepping forward. "If the original was stolen, how did you make replicas?"

"T-That...I-I bought a circulating replica, and made more replicas based on that one," Marion hisses.

"But you were the original artist of that painting, Master," Zak says. "That was the reason I looked up to you!" He takes a threatening step forward, and Marion whips out her phone. "Why would the original artist buy a replica of the original, and make more replicas based on that?"

"Besides, this one looks different," Floris says, walking over to a lone canvas in a corner of the room. Teeth clenching around the thick cloth, he unveils the painting, revealing what appears to be yet another piece of the same painting, the Sylvaria. Darryl isn't sure what's so different about this painting, but from the way Zak gasps, it's nothing good.

"This is the original," Zak says. "You lied to me, Master!"

"That's *enough*!" Marion screams. Zak shuts up. Darryl furrows his brows. "I'm calling my private security guard on you two! Barging in here without my permission! I can have you arrested for breaking and entering, you know!"

"This is bad," Floris whispers. "We have to get out of here!"

"They'll be coming in three minutes max," Marion says, the sweetest smile on her face. "You have nowhere to run."

Well, crap.

"Zak, might I suggest you start packing your bags?" Marion says, shoving her phone back into her pocket. "And perhaps find some nice corner in the street to sleep?"

"You can't be ser-oof!"

Darryl throws Zak into a chokehold, an arm around his neck, tossing his phone to the ground, open

to the Meta-Nav. "Floris, now!"

"What? A fox?" Marion hisses, noticing Floris a little too late, before the world changes and Darryl finds himself free falling through the museum, bright lights blinding him, Zak still in his arms. He squeezes his eyes shut and braces for impact.

Skeppy

Chapter Summary

The fourth awakening

Chapter Notes

short chapter

WARNING: contains slurs regarding intellectual disability

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

5/22 - FRIDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"OH MY FUCKING G-OWWWWW!"

Dream stands at the side, whistling and watching Sappap try to dig himself out from under a heap consisting of Bad, Zak and Fundy. Fundy screeches when Zak pulls on his tail in an attempt to wriggle out. When free, Fundy scrambles up Dream's shoulder, hissing at Zak like a cat. Bad leaps to his feet, dusting himself off.

"Geroff me!" Sappap not-so-nicely pushes Zak off of him, standing up and nursing his (possibly) fractured spine. If he's walking and talking like that, though, Sappap's probably fine.

"Wait, what the hell?" Zak lays on his back, peering up at the ceiling. He sits bolt upright, glancing around. "Where am I?"

"First of all, language," Bad says. "Second of all, we're in somewhere that's really difficult to explain right now."

Zak squints. "Darryl?"

"It's Bad here."

"What were you thinking bringing this guy here?" Dream asks, jabbing a thumb at Zak.

"Excuse me, I do not appreciate that comment-" Zak starts, only for Fundy to interrupt.

"Well, Marion was threatening to call the police on the both of them," Fundy says. Zak jumps, eyes as wide as saucers.

"That fox just talked."

"Yeah. Foxes do that," Sappap says. "Anyways, chop chop, let's get out of here. We can talk more outside."

They do not get more than a few meters before Zak pipes up again with another question.

"Hey, you haven't answered me yet. Where are we?"

"What you're seeing is inside of Marion's heart," Sapnap says. "This is what she really thinks of her home."

"This is a museum," Zak says flatly.

"Yeah, and you guys are nothing more than paintings to her," Dream says. "Not even animate objects."

Zak falls silent.

For some reason, the number of Shadows is scarce as they travel from one exhibition block to another. Most Shadows that appear do not require more than one bullet through their thick skulls to kill. Zak is the quietest they have ever seen him, observing each room in the museum, gaze focused on a few particular paintings.

"This is...my portrait," Zak says, reaching over to touch his painted face, only for his fingers to slip through the portrait, the image rippling. "If what you're saying is true, then Marion..."

They continue moving.

"Stop right there, you imbeciles!"

Oh, it's the big shot herself. Dream spins on his heels, finding himself face to face with what appears to be Marion's Shadow, dressed like a white gown flouncing around her hips as she sashays over to them, a fan in her hand, looking like a member of royalty. She is accompanied by two Shadow guards. Dream draws his pistol and releases the safety, cocking the gun right at her.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, would I, Zak?"

Zak can only stare at Marion, stiff as a board. "Master, is that you?"

Marion giggles, her cursed laughter resonating in the tiny exhibition hall. "Who else would I be, if not for your kind and forgiving Master, Zak?"

The way Zak's name rolls off her tongue, the way she pronounces the syllable like dripping poison from a cobra's fangs. It disgusts them. Dream tightens his grip on the trigger.

"Master, those copies of the Sylvaria you had in that room...why did you claim not to have had the real one when it was sitting in our house the whole time?"

"Silence, child!" Marion's lips curl downwards into an ugly sneer. "A retarded brat like you could never have come up with such a brilliant scheme!"

"Scheme?" Sapnap mutters.

"Indeed!" Marion says, holding her hands up high. "How about this? 'I managed to find the lost painting, but the public must not know. However, you can have it for a special price.' Art snobs will buy it all up, and I'll rake in the cash!"

"That is unforgivable! That's not the true value of art!"

"What do you know, you wretched brat?" Marion's eyes flash dangerously. The Shadow guards

flanking her take one step forward. A draft whips up in the room. Sapnap, Bad and Fundy whip out their weapons as well, preparing for battle. "The value of art is subjective, and that is exactly why you have to learn to sell it to the ignorant masses! Art is naught but a tool to gain money and fame!"

"You should stop sticking your money-grubbing paws everywhere," Dream snarls.

"Yeah, how dare you take advantage of Zak?" Darryl shouts.

"Money-grubbing paws?" Marion objectively looks more pissed than she has ever done. "I'm only doing what I have to survive in this world. Rascals like you would never understand!"

At this, Zak throws his head back, laughing like it's his last. Everyone turns to stare. He's gone mad, Dream tells himself. He's gone terribly mad. Zak grins, his hands at his hips.

"Thank you, Master. I had my doubts, but you've cleared them all away," Zak says. Blue light pools at his feet, which then spiral upwards, enveloping Zak in pure cyan. "Now I can rise against you without any apprehension!"

Have you come to your senses? How foolishly you have averted your eyes from the truth...

Zak drops to the ground, a hand at his head, the other clutching the surface of the rug.

A deplorable imitation indeed...best you part from that aspect of yourself! Let us now forge a contract...I am thou, thou art I...

Zak's chest heaves, his body curling in on himself. His nails rake the rug, leaving trails of blood. A faint figure begins to form behind him, wielding a katana, clad in a full kimono, the Japanese look complete with wooden sandals.

The world is filled with beauty and vice...and it's time you teach people which is which!

A mask appears on Zak's face, A cyan mask that shimmers, garish under the light, its bottom edge boldly lined with black and red. Blocks of black appear where the eye holes are, and if not for the slits, Dream isn't sure he could see out of it. His outfit changes, a cyan bodysuit wrapping around him, the entire length of his torso, arms and legs. It is complete with cyan gloves and boots with navy heels, a white sash around his waist bound with red-and-white string.

"Come to me, Goemon!" Zak rips the mask off his face, taking skin and blood with it, unleashing a power that blows even the Shadows away. With one mighty swing of its katana, Goemon sends the Shadows flying. Marion gapes, her face a picture of shock as Goemon stares her down.

"Guards!" she shouts, throwing a hand forward. "Guards! Get them!"

A swarm of Shadows emerge from swirling black voids from the ground, the walls, the ceiling. She has complete control over this place.

"It's time to run, guys!" Fundy shouts. "We can't take them all on!"

Bad shoves an Ender Pearl into Zak's hand. Dream makes for the skylight, hurling his last Ender Pearl through it, and he appears on the rooftop. Below in the exterior garden, the Shadow guards must have been alerted to their presence, because they seem to be on high alert, streams of red light beamed at the ground, at the shrubs, everywhere their gazes can reach.

Dream glances back. Sapnap, Fundy, Bad and Zak are with him. With all the Shadows on high

alert, it'll take a miracle to get back to their infiltration point...

"Fundy, transform, now!" Sapnap hisses.

"Transform?" Fundy cries. "You mean, into the Fundybus?"

Behind them, the disturbing skittering sound of Shadows is getting nearer and nearer. Fundy leaps into the air, transforming once more into the orange-and-black minivan. Dream and the others climb in. Once the last door has slammed shut, the Fundybus jerks. Through the rear- and side-view mirrors, Dream catches sight of the swarm of Shadows, black sludge on the ground, attempting latch onto Fundy.

"Step on it!" Sapnap shouts.

Dream grits his teeth, stomping down on the accelerator. The Fundybus shoots forward, right out of the sky, carrying a rainbow of Shadows with it. Dream's stomach drops, and all of a sudden, he doesn't feel too good. Sapnap screams. Bad screams. Zak screams. Dream isn't sure he isn't screaming as well.

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5/22 - FRIDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"Ow!"

A sense of *deja vu* washes over Clay as he struggles to escape the pile of bodies he's landed on. He picks himself up, watching as the others do the same, dusting themselves off, Phantom Thief outfits replaced by their usual street clothes. They have landed right outside Zak's studio at Lancer Lane, nary a scratch on them.

"You okay?" Darryl asks. Zak rubs at his head, slumped against the fence.

"I've never felt this tired in such a long time." His stomach growls. "And hungry. There's a good Indian restaurant just down the corner. Cheap. I could probably get three pieces of *prata* for, like, five bucks."

The eatery in question is an open-air restaurant, the smell of coconut milk and curry heavy in the air. Zak greets the owner, a middle-aged Indian man currently flipping *prata* (Clay can't help but stare. He does it like an honest-to-goodness *pro*). After their orders are taken, Zak leans forth, dropping his voice low.

"Can someone please tell me what the hell" - "Language," Darryl mutters. - "just happened?"

It is Floris who explains the entire concept of the Metaverse to him, leaving Zak contemplative. Their food arrives shortly after, several plates of *prata* and naan with a generous serving of curry. The conversation pauses entirely as the group consumes the food at lightning speed. As they say, hunger is the best ingredient. Once they're done, Clay leans back against the seat, watching Zak's every movement.

"Alright, I've decided," Zak says, placing his cup of water on the table, ice cubes clinking inside. "I'm gonna join you guys."

"Join us? You sure?" Nick asks. "You saw those things. Those monsters."

Zak whips out his phone and shows them his lock screen, a painting of a beautiful woman holding

a mysterious object in her arms, the genuine smile on her face captured perfectly.

"This is the Sylvaria, my Master's most prominent work," Zak says. "You can see the artist's emotions behind this piece, the gentleness of her expression. No one knows what she is holding, and that is the mystery of it all. That is the reason this work is so highly prized. It is that mystifying reason of her smile, covered by the clouds." He pockets his phone. "That's why when I heard of Master creating replicas and selling them in the black market...I can't tolerate her actions anymore. So if you say you can change her heart, I'm gonna believe you."

"I see," Clay says. "I'm not going to lie. It's gonna be dangerous, but if you think you can handle it, meet us at Valentine Hills on Sunday, at one in the afternoon."

"We're not going in tomorrow?" Zak asks, puzzled.

"He's got part-time work, and we don't go in unless everyone's together," Nick says. "You saw how we nearly got overwhelmed back there. Besides, you're not going in without any weapons, are you?"

"Weapons? Oh, yeah, guess not," Zak says, shrugging. "So we're getting weapons on Sunday?"

"Yeah, but Nick's got part-time work on Sundays, so the earliest we can go back to the Palace is on Monday. We usually operate on Mondays and Fridays, unless there are special circumstances, so just keep an eye out for messages."

Darryl adds Zak to their Phantom Thieves chat group, and the proud look on Zak's face is strangely satisfying.

"Okay, I've got a problem now," Zak says, clapping his hands together. "Actually, two problems. The first is that I've got nowhere to stay. Marion wants to kick me out, and she's gonna do it soon."

"You could just return and pack your bags, then come stay at my house," Darryl says. "Nick's mother is already housing Clay too, so I think it'll be a bit of a stretch to ask her to let another stray into her house."

"I'm not a stray."

"You may as well be," Floris says, laughing. Zak jumps.

"I'm not used to listening to foxes speak," Zak says. "Wait, lemme get this straight again. I can only understand this guy because I've heard him speak in the Metaverse?"

"Yeah," Floris says. "That seems to be the case. Normal people would think I'm just another fox."

"Oh," Zak says, nodding. "Makes sense."

"Yeah," Darryl says. "So, uh, what's your second problem?"

"Okay, here's the thing," Zak says, assuming a prayer pose. "I'm broke as fuck and there's no way I can pay for this meal."

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[5/22 - FRIDAY - EVENING](#)

Darryl: We have a giant problem that i completely forgot about

Darryl: Pls dont kill me

"What's going on?" Nick asks, his phone buzzing, but he's making no move to pick it up. With Mrs Armstrong out of the house again tonight, Nick and Clay are using the dining table to study (at least Nick is). Clay is procrastinating (as usual). He opens up the group chat group.

Zak: oh yea

Zak: the thing is

Zak: master called security on us

Clay: what

Zak: like she threatened to throw me out, and called security and the police and stuff

Darryl: she didnt call the police but close enough

Zak: tl;dr we're gonna get arrested

Clay drags a hand across his face, yawning. He's too exhausted to deal with this.

Zak: BUT

Zak: good news is that i dont think she'll actually arrest us before her exhibit ends though

Clay: whys that

"Oi," Nick says, throwing an eraser that strikes Clay on the forehead with his impeccable aim. "What's happening?"

Zak: 'cause being scandalous is not her thing

Z ak: is that panda guy there? is he dead?

Clay snorts. Nick aims a pen at him this time. "They think you're dead."

"They what?" Nick reaches for his phone and scrolls through the messages, typing furiously, then backspacing, then typing again, then backspacing...

Darryl: so when does her exhibit end

Nick: yo

Zak: uh June the 6th we dont got much time

Zak: oh look panda man's alive

Nick: excuse me

Clay wheezes, banging his fist against the table as he doubles over. Floris screeches in shock, glaring at Clay, then goes back to sleeping.

Zak: so anyway. we're gonna go into that palace thing. monday

Zak: after school, right? don't be late.

Nick: you should be the last one saying that

Oh well, with the addition of Zak, their fighting force would likely substantially improve, and the Phantom Thieves would grow ever closer...Clay shuts his phone off and gathers up his things, deciding to head to the room early to get a good night's rest.

Chapter End Notes

Dream's current Persona stock (6/8):

- Onmoraki
- Slime
- Inugami
- Jack Frost
- Koropokguru
- Shiisaa

Actions for today:

Knowledge +3 (studied with Nick)

A Break

Chapter Summary

the final member of the dream team is actually mentioned omg

Chapter Notes

WARNING: mention of prostitution

i could not wait any longer. muffintees just did not feel complete without him. he appears even if it's just a mention lmao

also, Alison is an OC

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

5/23 - SATURDAY - DAYTIME

"Do you believe in fate, Clay?" Ruby asks. Clay folds his uniform properly, stuffing it into his bag.

"Uh...kinda?" Clay says, zipping up his bag. "Where is this coming from?"

"Fate can't be changed, can it?" Ruby says sadly, staring down at her shoes. "Those born into poverty is fated to stay in poverty, fated to be stepped on by those in power. Isn't that right?"

"I don't believe that. I think people can change their f-"

Ruby glares at him. "That's because you don't understand how I feel! You don't understand what it's like to...to...drop out of high school, work a thousand jobs just to pay rent and bills and-!" Tears begin to form at the corner of her eyes, but she refuses to let them fall. Instead, she bites her lip, her hands fisted on her lap. "You just don't understand!"

Right at her outburst, the door swings open, and a woman steps in from the back entrance. Clay has never seen this woman before. Her face is caked in makeup, pronounced lashes and her severe blush her defining features. She strides into the room, barely even sparing either of them a glance. Is she a new employee here? Well, she looks like someone who'd belong in a mansion, or a castle, even.

"Oh, it's you," the woman says, smirking at Ruby. Ruby looks away, suddenly uncomfortable.

"Hey, when are you gonna pay up? Your rent's overdue by, what? Three months? Another month, and we're kicking you out. You know that." Her eyes slide over to Clay, then back at Ruby. "Who's this? Your sugar daddy? Looking a little young, isn't he? You siblings are the same."

She giggles haughtily, then heads on into the changing room.

"Let's..." Clay tugs on Ruby's wrist. "Let's go outside and get some crepes, yeah?"

Ruby swipes at her eyes, making no more effort to hide the droplets running down her cheeks in streams.

Once outside, Ruby punches the brick wall, much to Clay's shock. Her knuckles come away bruised, a grotesque red and purple blossoming on her knuckles.

"That bitch," Ruby hisses. "That bitch dares to come and lecture me..."

"Who was that?" Clay asks. He shields her from prying eyes and curious gazes as they make their way to the Central Street at Valentine Hills.

["She's](#) my...landlord's daughter," Ruby says quietly. "She and her father have been coming over and demanding more and more money every month. I don't even think it's illegal, but I don't have the money to...all I can really do is to pay them what they demand."

Clay sits her down at a bench, lending Ruby his hoodie as a shield against the breeze - that ratty jacket of hers is useless in this weather. Ruby sniffs, wiping her nose with a tissue from her bag, while Clay buys crepes for the both of them. Vanilla ice cream, Ruby's favourite. At least this time, she does not make a fuss about him paying for her as she chews slowly.

"What about your brother? Is he-"

"You may have guessed it," Ruby says, "from what Shelia said. Yeah, my brother is a prostitute. It's fine if he wants to be one, but the thing is, he *doesn't*. Do you know how many times I had to fix him up because his clients just...do you know how many times he's cried himself to sleep?" A drop of ice cream lands past the rip in her jeans. Ruby dabs it up with her tissue. "Sorry, I shouldn't be burdening you with this, huh?"

"It's fine." Clay's heart clenches.

Ruby hums. They sit in silence, each busy with their own crepes. Clay thinks. Hard. How can he help Ruby? Increasing rent like that is probably illegal, but Ruby doesn't have the finances to hire a lawyer. Stuck in a situation like this, both siblings have to suffer, and even worse, they may end up homeless.

"I...I have to go back," Ruby says. "Thank you so much for listening to me."

Clay nods, giving her a smile, as she disposes of the wrapper and leaves, trotting off towards the train station. He picks his things up from the bench and checks his phone, then makes his way towards the

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[5/23 - SATURDAY - EVENING](#)

"Hey, thanks for meeting me outside."

Clay finds himself sitting at the Valentine Hills diner with Yao Yi, who is currently devouring a giant plate of fish and chips. Meanwhile, Clay has trouble even finishing that small basket of potato wedges. Yao Yi swallows that entire mouthful of fish. Yao Yi makes a grab for her phone, which Clay holds just out of reach. "You done yet?"

"I failed Lit."

"This has nothing to do with Lit."

When Clay is done reading the post on the Phan-Site, he hands Yao Yi back her phone. Yao Yi gasps, wiping at her screen with a handkerchief while scowling at him. "You got your oily fingerprints all over it!"

"I apologise from the depths of my soul." Clay doesn't sound very sorry at all.

"You'd better be sorry," Yao Yi says. "Anyway, what do you think?"

"It's worth looking into," Clay says. "Even if it's a small-time target."

"You have to start small, but you'll rise up in no time," Yao Yi chides, holding up a finger. "And when that happens, you're gonna thank me."

"Thank you...for what, exactly?"

"For building up your image!" Yao Yi says excitedly. "I'm pretty much your image manager right now, with all the Phan-Site forum and stuff."

Clay yawns. "Yeah, so, uh, we'll check it out. And good luck doing your, uh, managerial duties."

"You look so bored."

"I'm not. I'm just entering a food coma."

Yao Yi shrugs. "If you say so. Is that your dinner? Seriously? You're a growing man."

Clay yawns in response. Well, at least he and Yao Yi are forging a somewhat-deeper friendship. When the clock strikes six-thirty, he bids farewell to her and makes for home.

*

5/24 - SUNDAY - DAYTIME

"Oh, you're back. What do you want this time? Got another medal for sale?" Phil asks, picking at the cuticles of his nail. "Oh, you've brought friends."

"No, I need new weapons. These are breaking apart," Clay says, ignoring the two people bickering behind him, placing his chipped blade on the table. "What else do you recommend?"

"He should have new stock, remember? Ask him about it," Floris urges.

"If I remember right, you got dagger, some kinda cudgel and a whip," Phil says, scratching his chin. "Okay, I've got you covered. You wanna sell them? Your old weapons?"

"Yeah, was gonna ask you about that." Clay digs Nick's cudgel from where it is stuffed into his bag. Floris helps him retrieve his pistol and Sapnap's shotgun as well.

"Oh, and I need weapons for him," Clay says, jabbing a thumb at Zak.

"A sword would be great," Zak says. "Oh, and I think I'd like an assault rifle."

"Don't really know your way around guns, do you?" Phil mumbles, picking out some of his newer wares from their cardboard boxes behind the counter.

"Oh, and I'd like a new saber and slingshot too," Clay says.

"Slingshot? What do you think I run? A hobby shop?"

"It technically is," Zak says, whistling.

Phil laughs good-naturedly. "I like this guy." He places several realistic weapons on the counter, each of them brand new. A new cudgel, branded with silver on both ends, a new pistol with a shiny barrel, a katana slotted into a sleek black sheath, and many others.

"We'll take those," Clay says. "How much does it amount to?" He's confident he can pay up, considering the money he earned and extorted from Shadows in the Palace and Mementos. Phil punches numbers into a calculator and holds it up to them. Clay fishes out the required bills from his wallet and hands them to an impressed Phil.

"You're not participating in anything illegal, are you?" Phil asks, counting the bills. "No robbery, no theft, nothing?"

Well, technically extortion...and the theft of hearts. Can that be considered a crime? "Nah."

"Whoa!" Zak cries, picking the brand new sword up from the counter. "This...is...cool. Can I swing at random people with it?"

"No, you may not," Darryl says, snatching the sword from him. "You're not getting arrested for disturbance of the peace. I'll be in charge of the weapons."

Zak laughs, but makes no move to snatch the sword back. Phil bags their purchase, handing them to Darryl and Clay. Darryl and Zak head out first, with Clay lingering in the store.

"What happened to that part-timer from the other day?" Clay asks. "The scary one?"

"Oh, him? Tommy? Probably down at the arcade or something," Phil says. "Man, that boy worries me sometimes. Why? You looking for him?"

"No, just curious." I'd rather not be in the store when he's around. There is something about the gleam in Tommy's eyes that sends shivers up Clay's spine.

"Speaking of which," Phil says, holding up a paper bag, "take this and leave. You can give it back to me the next time we meet." He presses it into Clay's hands. "Alright, now go, before *they* come."

They? Clay wants to ask. Before he gets a chance to, Phil lowers his hat, casting a shadow over his eyes, and the door opens, the bell above it chiming. Clay watches as two burly men in black suits walk in, sunglasses perched on their noses. Tiny devices appearing to look like hearing aids are strung up to their ears. Clay gulps. Whatever this is, he wants no part in it. Just as his hand touches the door, meaty fingers close around his wrist, stopping him.

"Who are you and what are you doing in this shop?"

"Hey, lay your hands off him. He's a customer," Phil says. "I'm the one you wanna talk to."

The burly man who grabbed Clay scrutinizes him, then lets him go. Phil's eyes dart to the door, then back at him, and Clay makes a mental note to thank Phil next time. When he exits the store, heart in his mouth, Darryl and Zak are waiting for him outside, yelling at each other about something trivial once again.

"What took you so long?" Darryl asks.

"We were dying from the heat out here," Zak agrees. "Ooh, and what is *that*?" Zak reaches over and steals it from Clay's grasp, eliciting a cry of surprise. He unwraps the paper bag, much to Clay's chagrin, a gleeful expression on his face. From within the bag, he retrieves a pistol that looks almost exactly the same as the one Clay had just sold, except it has several additional fixtures to it. Its grip is golden, and its bullet chamber seems bigger.

"It's like a pistol that one of those circus performers carry," Zak says, pointing the gun at Darryl, who folds his arms, and pretends to shoot him.

"Whoa, lemme see that," Floris says, paws slapping at Clay's back, scrambling up to his shoulder, eyes lighting up at the sight. "That's...really golden."

"You don't say," Zak says. "And it's light too. It's some quality stuff."

"It's not even a real gun," Clay sighs.

"What if this Phil guy can customize guns like that?" Floris says, tail wagging. "Look, if an enemy sees you with golden guns blazing, wouldn't they be more afraid of you? Then due to the cognitive effects of the Metaverse, our guns would be more powerful."

"Hell yeah!" Zak cries. He stuffs the pistol back into the bag. "We should totally ask that guy if we can make our guns look cooler. Then those Shadows won't stand a chance!"

Clay isn't sure what the link between having cool guns and efficiently defeating enemies is, but if his team is enthusiastic about it, and if Floris endorses it, then it may give them an advantage in battle. Clay glances back at the shop. He's not entirely certain he wants to go back in right now, given that those two men are still inside. With those muscles, they could probably break every bone in Clay's body in record time.

"I'll ask him the next time we're here," Clay says, shuddering.

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5/24 - SUNDAY - DAYTIME

"Okay, so, take a deep breath."

Clay does as he is told, sucking in a breath and exhaling slowly. At least he didn't faint this time.

"How do you feel?" Joel asks, scribbling down his observations onto a sheet of paper on his clipboard. "You-"

There is a sudden knock on the door, a frantic rapping of knuckles against wood. Joel sighs.

"That sounds urgent," Clay says, trying to pretend that he did not jump from the shock that nearly stopped his heart.

"Yeah, it does, doesn't it?" Joel says, rising from his chair. "A doctor doesn't neglect his patients." He heads over to the door and opens it, almost hitting the man standing outside. A look of recognition crosses Joel's face.

"Doctor, please, you have to help Alison!" the man cries. "Her illness came back, and I'm not sure what to do..."

Joel pushes past the man, striding over to the young girl seated outside, who does not look older

than ten. Her hands are on her chest, ragged breaths forced from her mouth and nose. Her face is a mask of discomfort, beads of sweat trickling past her sideburns, dripping from her jaw.

"Are you sure that the diagnosis was acute bronchitis?" Joel asks as he crouches down beside the girl, Alison.

"That's what Doctor Rivers said! She said-Please, I'll do anything!"

Doctor Rivers? Is she the same woman who is trying to strip Joel of his medical license? Probably. How many Doctors Rivers are there in this city?

"Into the examining room," Joel says. "Come on, Clay. Bring me exactly what I tell you to. First, get the water basin and fill it up to about three-quarters with water. Next..."

Clay does as he is told. Alison sits on the bed as Joel administers the medicine, giving her a glass of water with a tablet dissolved inside, giving the solution a milky colour.

["Fluimucil"](#) should help for now, but Alison would need proper treatment for her illness," Joel says. "It's going to be expensive, though. About a hundred thousand dollars should cut it."

"What? A hundred thousand...?" the man stares despondently at the ground. "Of course, I will pay you, if only Alison..."

"Hold on," Joel says. "Just now, that doctor you mentioned. Rivers, was it?"

"Yeah...Doctor Rivers of-"

"Then it's free," Joel says. "Medication, checkups, everything. If her condition worsens tomorrow, come back immediately. There may have been something we missed."

"T-Thank you, Doc!" the man shakes Joel's hand furiously. "I don't know how I can ever repay you!"

Joel laughs. "Coming to see me is repayment enough." He turns to Alison, the little girl looking way more peppy and chipper now. "You run along now and don't do anything too tiring, okay?"

Alison beams, nodding happily. "Thank you, Doctor! I won't!" She leaps off the couch, taking her father's hand, the two of them walking out of the clinic with relieved and happy expressions. Clay glances over at Joel, whose smile appears genuine, a rare sight. Joel catches him staring, because he deadpans, "What?"

"Why free?"

Joel grins, opening the door to the examination room. Clay follows him inside. "You see, stealing Rivers' patient is the best kind of revenge I can get. No amount of money can outweigh this satisfaction."

Clay snickers.

*

[5/24 - SUNDAY - EVENING](#)

"Good evening. I am your tutor starting today, Wilbur Soot. But you can just call me Wilbur."

Clay sizes him up. Honestly, this man's appearance is less than impressive, but from his tone of

voice, Clay is detecting some serious Literature talent right there. Mrs Armstrong is up in her office, and Nick is in his room, leaving Clay with Wilbur in the dining hall with Floris curled by his ankle, deciding to join Clay to stave off boredom. They settle down at the dining table, with Clay's Literature books spread out all over its surface.

"To Kill a Mockingbird, Julius Caesar, Macbeth...I presume you've finished at least one of them?"

"Finished? One of them?" Clay stares at the books dumbly. No, he has not even *touched* a single one of those books. Or perhaps he did - To Kill a Mockingbird = because he needed to use it in school.

"Yes," Wilbur says. "Though from the look on your face, you probably have never even opened them. No matter. We will remedy this."

Getting Literature tuition may seem no different from the school lesson itself, but what sets it apart is that Wilbur addresses his questions swiftly and attempts to engage him with little bits of history and trivia.

"How's school, Clay?"

"Great. As great as you can expect from school." Wilbur chuckles.

"Education is important," Wilbur says. "Not just the content, but the soft skills you pick up from studying towards examinations, like time management and perseverance."

Clay hums. He glances at the book in Wilbur's hand, which he had been reading while waiting for Clay to finish that exercise. Wait, it's a book Clay's read before, and only because he was bored and because he's watched the movie.

"Is that Coraline?" Clay asks.

Wilbur perks up. "Hmm? Yes. You read it before?"

"Somewhat." Clay would choose the movie over the book any day, but then again, that movie gave him nightmares for weeks. He shivers at the memory.

"Coraline by Neil Gaiman. A young girl finds herself visiting a world in which all her desires are fulfilled. There, she meets the Other Mother, and the world isn't quite as it should be." Wilbur shakes his head. "I've never watched the movie, but I think it would have been quite scary," Wilbur says. "If you like this, though, I've got a couple of books to recommend, if you'd like me to."

"Sounds like this Coraline's got her own Palace," Floris says. "Hey, maybe if we read books like these, we'd gain more insight into how society thinks, and we can better prepare ourselves for our Palace excursions."

That makes sense. "Yeah, sure. Thanks."

"Great," Wilbur says, perking up. "There's a short story I finished recently, called The Most Dangerous Game, by Richard Connell. Perhaps you'd like to start with something simple and less abstract."

Clay can feel a faint bond forming between himself and Wilbur.

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast acquired a new vow. It shall become the wings of rebellion that breaketh thy chains of captivity. With the birth of the Tower Persona, I have obtained the winds of

blessing that shall lead to freedom and new power...

"Well, that's all for today," Wilbur says. "Maybe you can finish that short story by next week and we can discuss it."

Clay nods and sees Wilbur out.

*

5/25 - MONDAY - MORNING

"Hey, you heard of the new kid?"

Yao Yi is seated in the seat in front of Clay - Darryl's seat, because Darryl hasn't arrived yet.

"New kid?" Clay asks.

"Yeah, someone who's newer than you," Yao Yi says, snorting. "Can you believe that? Anyway, I heard he's transferring into this class."

"Uh, why are you getting so excited over this?" Clay says, scrolling mindlessly through the Internet, browsing for free PDF copies of the short story Wilbur recommended to him when a thought occurs to him. "Wait a minute, how do you even know that he's a guy?"

"I have my sources."

"You mean gossip."

"Mean," Yao Yi says, punching his arm. "Anyway, his reputation seems worse than yours. Like, criminal."

"What do you mean 'like criminal'?" Clay huffs.

"Most people still don't trust you yet, in case you forgotten," Yao Yi says, lowering her voice. "Still, if you're part of the Phantom Thieves, you probably didn't break the law."

Yao Yi is such a big fangirl of the Phantom Thieves (even though they've only committed their first heist) that Clay isn't sure what to say in response to that. Instead, he settles for sighing.

"Hey," Darryl says, and Clay jumps, not realizing that he's even standing there. Yao Yi springs from the seat with a sheepish smile, apologizing to Darryl before heading off to join her friends. Darryl places his bag beneath the table.

"So, uh, what was she talking to you about?"

"Phantom Thief stuff," Clay says, head on his hand, elbow propped up on the table. Darryl hums.

"You heard that there's gonna be another transfer student?"

Clay throws his hands in the air, much to Darryl's amusement.

"His name's George."

"Like I was asking Cheng, how do you guys even know all this?"

Darryl blinks. "Because we're curious human beings. You will do well to follow in our example,

Clay, and not remain an ignorant muffinhead."

Clay groans and decides to plant his face onto the table. Darryl laughs heartily and turns back to face the front of the class.

Chapter End Notes

Charm +3 (working at convenience store)

Sun arcana rank 5 -> 6

Moon arcana rank 1 -> 2

Temperance arcana rank 3 -> 4

Guts +2 (shady clinical trial)

Tower rank 0 -> 1

Knowledge +5 (tuition)

Museum of Vanity: Infiltration Core

Chapter Summary

re-entering the museum of vanity

Chapter Notes

just to note that whatever isabelle marion says in the chapter are actual lines taken from the game from her game counterpart! With slight tweaks though because the game's lines make reference to east asian culture

5/25 - MONDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"He needs a code name."

"Code name? We get code names?" Zak glances around him, grinning from ear to ear. He seems way too excited about this, having gawped at his own Phantom Thief outfit and the grappling hook contraption that Fundy gave him, glinting a dull grey against his cyan bodysuit.

"Yeah," Darryl says. "Our leader's Dream, then that's Sapnap, that's Fundy, and I'm Bad."

"Don't be so hard on yourself."

Darryl glares at him. "Don't push your luck."

"Alright, so, what's his code name gonna be?" Sapnap asks.

"I wanna be Skeppy!" Zak cries. "Easy to remember, easy to yell."

"Skeppy," Dream muses, feeling the name rolling off his tongue fluidly. "Skeppy it is, then."

Zak cheers, swinging his katana around happily. At least, until Bad has the barrel of his submachine gun to Zak's head, and, very sweetly, tells him to stop. Dream shudders. Despite his mannerisms and looks, Bad is probably the scariest one out of all of them. Dream holds out the map for the entire group to see. "Alright, the last safe room was here, and there's this window that we can go in from...There's a bunch of Shadows patrolling this area, though, so we've got to be really careful."

They scurry past the exterior garden, shooting their grappling hooks up at the wall when the Shadows' backs are turned. They soar through the air, landing neatly through the window one by one. When Skeppy is through, Bad slams the window shut.

"Alright, coast clear," Fundy says, standing at the exit to the room, one paw on the doorjamb. They move out, past the garden with the deactivated lasers and electrical fence, past the control room and into a giant hall with the largest, most golden statue of Isabelle Marion they've ever seen, dressed in the most flamboyant outfit they have ever seen, despite being all gold.

"You know, I always kinda knew that Master was...but still, I squashed those doubts," Skeppy says, approaching the statue. "She took me in when I had no family. I couldn't doubt my Master who showed me such kindness."

"But she only wanted to use you for your talent," Sapnap says, a tinge of apology in this voice.

"Yeah," Skeppy says. "Let's go."

The next room, past the hall with the statue, appears to be under construction, with a couple of paintings hung haphazardly on the walls. The paintings themselves are beautiful, to a layman's eyes, and each frame is around twice their height. The nearest painting to them is one of a desert, the scorching sun blazing down on the innocent camels trekking through the dunes. It is also the only one within reach. The other paintings are too high up on the wall to view properly.

"Hey, I remember this," Skeppy says. "This was one of Master's..." His voice trails off and he frowns. "At least, I've seen it before in one of Master's exhibitions."

"So, is this a dead end? I don't see any other paths leading forward," Sapnap says, glancing around the room.

There is something strange about these paintings, but Dream cannot put his finger on what it may be. The others include a painting of a traditional East Asian temple, a boat assaulted by a Kraken sinking into the sea, a bamboo forest flanking a stone path and a wintry mountainous landscape. Skeppy looks lost in thought as well, brows furrowed.

"You figure anything out, Skeppy?"

Skeppy turns to face them. "Dunno. It's just a hunch, but, don't you think the paintings...it's like they've got no connection to each other. Why'd she put them in the same exhibition hall?"

Maybe that was what was weighing down on Clay's mind. Gingerly, he reaches over and touches the camel painting, drawing his hand back as if he's touched a flame when the space sinks beneath his touch. The painting ripples, just like those back in the first exhibition hall, with the paintings of Marion's students.

"Hey, wait a minute," Skeppy says, repeating what Dream did. "The paintings move! I can actually go inside!"

"Go inside?" Fundy leaps onto Skeppy's shoulder and sticks his head in. When he pulls out, his tongue lolls from his mouth as he pants hard. "It's *hot*!"

"It's a desert," Sapnap says, shrugging.

"Still, if we can go inside the paintings...maybe one of them will open a path forward," Dream says.

"I think it's worth trying," Skeppy says, already having put half his arm through the painting. The painting pulses even more frantically when Skeppy submerges his whole arm in. He then climbs in, until his entire person is within the painting. He waves at them from the inside, beckoning them in. Dream enters the painting, followed by Sapnap, Fundy and Bad. Once inside, Dream almost faints from the heat.

Wearing this kind of thick cloak in the sweltering desert is *not* Dream's idea of a fun time. Within seconds, he's sweating buckets, hair matted to his forehead, clothes sticking to his body. The mask suddenly feels very stuffy. Up ahead, past the stationary camels, appears to be a thin film of

wavering space. Does it lead to another painting?

"Oh my God, let's get outta here," Sapnap says, walking on ahead, fanning himself as he walks towards the unstable space.

Alas, this world is filled with laymen who cannot understand true beauty! The slow drain of my skill is inevitable when I am surrounded by such mediocrity.

"What is that?" Bad asks, glancing around. "It's not just me, right?"

"I heard it too," Fundy says. "It's Marion's voice. We're hearing her true inner thoughts."

Skeppy says nothing, and presses onwards. Dream and the rest follow behind him, now finding themselves in a whole separate landscape, atop a mountain in a snowstorm. Dream clutches his coat tighter to himself, teeth chattering. What is *up* with these paintings? Bringing them from one extreme to the next? Moreover, thanks to the copious amount of sweat clinging to his body, the bite of the draft is even more vicious.

People gather in churches, offer their money and time, and return home fully satisfied. Art is practically the same. In the end, it's all just a matter of imagination!

They press on, running past the gates of the chapel perched on the mountaintop, quickly throwing themselves through the next portal. This time, they are in the bamboo forest, surrounded by the stiff, strong stalks of bamboo, a rocky cliff edge protruding from within.

Hard work is not what makes a sapling grow thick with green leaves. Too many young people do not see the true value in youth these days. What fools...Is it truly wrong for an expert such as myself to capitalize on the youth before it wastes away?

"She's just jealous of young talent?" Fundy mutters. "How despicable."

Skeppy, on the other hand, remains oddly silent.

Climbing up the cliff, they dive into the next portal, which takes them to the next painting. They appear to be stranded at sea, the sailboat of theirs braving tumultuous waves, frothing with white flecks of foam. Beneath them, a giant squid has the boat in its hold, menacing eyes glaring up at them.

Could a ship skirt across the ocean if its crew constantly had to worry about what sea life may lie below? Art, life, water...they are all identical. The one who ascends to the summit is the victor!

The next painting appears to be that of tatami mats of a temple, branches of cherry blossom hanging low overhead. Dream ducks beneath one, wandering past the tatami, trying but failing to drown out the piercing voice booming in his temples.

Beauty is merely a mirage...Transforming that into money is what brings about true happiness. My fine mansion, my lifestyle among the chosen few...Those things are the true "art"!

"I'm glad we're changing her heart," Skeppy says. There is no more portal at the end. Glancing out of the painting, Dream notices a platform that they have reached. He carefully steps out of the painting; first tapping the ground cautiously, then putting his full weight on it. The Thieves leave the final painting and make their way past a door at the end of the platform.

The door opens up into another sparkly golden room. Except this one is slightly different. It is less of a room and more of a chamber, a chamber exclusively for abstract art. Random pieces of painting come to life above their heads; singing crickets, lavender in full bloom, drifting clouds thinly veiling a silver moon. Roses spring to life where they walk, leaving a trail of beauty and thorns.

The place is devoid of Shadows, which makes it feel...empty somehow. They take staircases that lead nowhere, running up escalators going down, running left through passages upside down. They seem to be doing pretty well finding their way through this lawless land, that is, until they reach a fork in the road. At each fork, a painting is placed.

"The Sylvaria..." Bad mumbles.

"Yeah," Skeppy says. "Does this mean that we have to choose the correct path to proceed?"

One path goes downwards, through a doorway radiating a deep blue light. The other door goes upwards, also glowing with a light the colour of the sea.

"The woman wasn't wearing blue," Dream notes and gestures to the path leading down. "So it must be this way."

"Yeah." Skeppy nods. "I doubt anyone could have gotten that wrong."

Sapnap huffs. Dream touches the painting with the woman in red, and the painting disappears, leaving in its place a speck of golden light that flits down to the doorway at the end of the descending staircase. The group chases after it, passing through the blue-turned-gold doorway. Dream's head spins for a split second, and he finds himself staring at another long hallway, this time with one single doorway - shining with a navy blue this time - and several paintings of the Sylvaria lined neatly in a row, the canvases hung on the wall.

"What is this? Some spot the difference game?" Sapnap mumbles.

"Might as well be," Fundy says. "Skeppy, that painting..."

Skeppy is inspecting each of the paintings, face mere inches from the canvas, his hand on his chin. Dream and Bad each scrutinize the paintings on their own, while Sapnap hangs behind with Fundy. Artistically illiterate, they are.

"This one," Bad says, pointing at a particular painting. "This is the real one."

"How do you guys even tell?" Fundy looks amazed. "Though, I expect nothing less from you, Bad."

"Aw, thanks." Bad nods approvingly, waiting for Skeppy's input. Skeppy breaks into a wide grin, claiming that that painting is the one. Bad lays his palm on it, and the painting scatters into gold dust, raining onto the ground to form a mound. The same speck of golden light emerges from the painting and floats towards the doorway. Dream and the others chase after it, hurtling themselves through the now-golden doorway, and ending up at another location, this time with even more Sylvaria-lookalikes.

"Great. Just how long does this go for?" Fundy whines.

"This is probably the last one," Dream says. "Rule of three, or something."

Fundy gives him a look. "I don't think Palaces work that way."

"Oh, this one's easy," Skeppy says. "It's obviously this one."

Dream blinks, staring between the one Skeppy's pointing to, and the painting right beside it. Skeppy frowns, obviously expecting some sort of reaction but getting none.

"Uh," Dream starts. "I may be speaking for all of us here."

"It *is* the one," Skeppy insists. "See! There are five petals here on this flower, but this fake one has four!" He gestures wildly to the flora in question, and Dream gapes. Well, no one can really blame them if they missed it, especially since Dream isn't too sure what the original looked like anyway. Skeppy presses his hand confidently onto the painting, which bursts into glimmering sparkles. The same speck of light flutters from the painting, diving into what Dream hopes to be the final blue doorway, giving it an iridescent golden shine.

When the group passes through the doorway, they are met with a familiar corridor, a regal crest repeated along the walls and the carpet. Dream sees a flash of movement out of the corner of his eye, and notices a single Shadow patrolling the hallway. They should be further along inside the Palace now, and hopefully closer to the Treasure. This must be the home stretch.

Dream holds up his hand, back pressed against the wall, observing the Shadow out of his peripheral vision. When it comes close, Dream throws down his hand, giving the signal, and the Phantom Thieves rain a hail of bullets on their unsuspecting victim, not even giving the Shadow a chance to scream, let alone fight back. It bursts into ash immediately. Skeppy blows on the barrel of his gun (unfortunately, the desired effect is not as pronounced when he's using an assault rifle).

"I can sense it," Fundy says. "Right ahead. Steel yourselves."

Dream stares down the long hallway, empty for now, but Shadows will rise up sooner or later. He begins to run, dashing past the exhibits, cloak fluttering behind him.

They are almost there. The change of heart will come soon enough.

Museum of Vanity: Infiltration Finale

Chapter Summary

securing the route to the treasure

Chapter Notes

omg now dream has so much stuff to do hes pretty much occupied on like tues, wed, thurs, sat and sun basically im only limited to like 2 palace runs a week what have i done to myself

the part-time job timings isnt even that realistic how can they allow nick to only work 1 day a week

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

5/25 - MONDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"This way!" Dream hisses, ducking into a safe room. Bad and Sapnap scramble in after him. Fundy scampers through and Skeppy slams the door shut. Oh God, what kind of Shadow was that? To be honest, Dream figured it would be tough since there was this unholy crimson aura blazing around it. It has seen them, they've ran, and Dream is certain it's going to go around blabbering about their presence because why wouldn't it?

"Well, now what?" Skeppy asks.

"We're just gonna have to wait for it to leave," Sapnap says, slumping into the sofa. "God, I'm beat."

They have a short rest, exhausted from their journey through the Palace so far. It gave them an insight into Marion's mind, and how screwed up she is. And Dream is just an outsider. He cannot begin to imagine how Skeppy would be feeling right now.

"Alright, let's play UNO," Skeppy says, digging out a deck of cards from his...his...Dream does not want to know how one fits a deck of UNO cards into a skintight bodysuit.

"You brought cards?" Bad looks at him incredulously.

"Obviously."

"What do you *mean* 'obviously'?" Sapnap leans forward as Skeppy begins to deal out the cards. Fundy hops onto the couch beside Dream and picks up his own hand of cards.

"Bring poker next time," Dream says, picking up his hand. Not excellent, but not terrible either.

They end with Fundy as champion and Sapnap losing horribly. When the noise outside has died down considerably, Skeppy keeps the cards, and they continue onward, spirits renewed (after a

game of UNO, no less...maybe their group is simpler than he thought).

The coast is clear outside, with zero Shadows in sight. Security level has dropped; Dream can no longer sense the same heightened tension in the air. Making use of this, he sprints down the corridor, eventually coming to what appears to be a large chamber, its double bronze doors open. Standing behind a box formed from lasers is none other than Marion herself, staring straight ahead, as if expecting them. It doesn't seem like she's seen them yet, or there'd be Shadows at their heels.

"So, what now?" Sapnap asks. "There's the Treasure, alright." Past the wall of lasers is the same sphere of mist that they had seen back in Krones' castle.

"Have we secured our infiltration route?" Bad asks.

"Well, in a way," Fundy says, "but not quite. We found the Treasure, but we have no way to get to it unless we deactivate those lasers."

"There's some kinda room with all those weird techie thingamajigs," Skeppy says, gesturing to a tiny control room beside the main chamber. "If they're controlling the lasers from somewhere, it could be there, right?"

It's worth taking a look. Silently, Dream crouches and use the numerous exhibits along the hallway for cover, then once he's in the clear, he makes for the control room. Hopefully, Marion didn't see a thing. Entry to the control room does not require any password whatsoever, so they saunter in, finding only one monitor lit up. There are only three commands they can issue from this computer: Disable Lasers, Turn Off Power and Open Shutters.

"Hey, we can disable the lasers from here," Dream says.

"Let's try it, then." Skeppy clicks on the option, only for an Error message to pop up.

"So we can't disable it unless we're Marion herself?" Fundy folds his paws. "Wow, that's deceiving."

"We should be glad we didn't trigger an alarm or something," Bad says. "What about the other options?"

Dream tries to turn the power off next. The lasers could be connected to some main power source, right? The next thing he knows, the museum falls into darkness, the only light emanating from the random flecks of gold sprinkled on the walls. Sapnap peers through a tiny window that gives them a full view of the Treasure chamber. Marion and her Shadow guards are bewildered, but not exactly panicking. In a couple of seconds, the lights turn on again, and a pop-up window appears on the screen.

"Backup generators?" Sapnap groans.

"So basically the darkness would last a few seconds," Fundy says. "Useless."

"Well, what's the last option?" Bad asks.

Open Shutters? Dream does recall seeing shutters blocking off a path on the other side of the chamber, opposite the control room. Maybe that would lead somewhere? Too soon after Dream clicks on the option that he hears the whirr of shutters rising and the scream of Shadows.

"There they are!" the Shadows burst into black sludge, transforming into their more monstrous forms - a pack of wolf spirits, thin as paper, scrolls bound to the top of their heads.

"Ooh boy." Skeppy draws his katana. "Here they come." With one swing of his sword, Skeppy erects a barrier of icicles, razor tips dissuading the spirits from getting closer. Sapnap slams a palm to the ground, summoning veins of electricity crackling overhead and zapping the wolf spirits to oblivion. For good measure, Dream, Bad and Fundy rain bullets on the spirits from on high. The spirits could not even retaliate, their swirling gales absorbed completely by Skeppy's ice wall. Within seconds, they are reduced to nothing but dust.

"Woo, that was easy," Skeppy says, brushing dust off his sleeve.

Staying here would probably lead to their discovery, which would spell trouble and probably another game of UNO, taking up precious time that Dream doesn't have because of his and Nick's seven p.m. curfew (Mrs Armstrong is supposed to be home this evening). Dream leads them out of there, headed to the new corridor that has opened up.

The new corridor leads them around the chamber, to a back room filled with equipment of all kinds, including lighting equipment, speakers, cameras, even a winch for some kind of pulley system. A panel of buttons is fixed on the wall next to the winch, glowing red and green, their only source of light in this dark room. Bad lights a fire on his finger, and they venture deeper with the light of the flame.

Fundy finds a small window at the very top, reachable by climbing a short ladder leaning against the wall. Fundy scampers up its rungs. Sapnap holds the ladder steady, allowing Dream, Bad and Skeppy safe passage up to the ledge as well. Crawling through the tiny window - big enough to fit only one person at a time - they emerge in the main chamber, above the box of lasers, peering down from a ledge.

"Hey, there aren't any lasers on the top," Fundy observes.

"But there's no way to get down," Dream says.

"What about this hook?" Skeppy asks, grabbing onto a hook just a few inches from where they stand. "Think we can make use of it somehow? Like, lower someone down to grab it?"

Dream snaps his fingers. "Genius, Skeppy."

"Thank you." Skeppy beams. "Now, how do we get this to work?"

"We saw a winch back there," Fundy says. "Wanna go check it out?"

Sapnap is still halfway up the ladder. Dream makes a shooing motion. "Go check that winch out, Sapnap." Sapnap glances at Dream, then back at the ground exasperatedly, before making his way down once more, with Bad keeping the ladder steady. Sapnap tries pushing and pulling the winch handle several times before giving up. That thing was not moving.

"What about the buttons?" Skeppy asks. "Do you think that can move the winch?"

Sapnap taps the green button, and Fundy stifles a cry of surprise. The winch has began to move on its own, lowering the hook down straight past the lasers, close enough to reach the Treasure from.

"Wind it back! Wind it back or else the Shadows will see!" Bad cries. Sapnap punches the red button, and the hook rises back to its original position.

"So, we can potentially make use of the hook," Skeppy says. "Alright! I nominate myself to be that guy on the hook."

"That hook isn't gonna sustain your weight," Fundy says as a matter-of-factly. "If anyone, it should be me."

"Yeah, I'm gonna have to agree with Fundy this time," Dream says. "He's small enough, so it's less likely the guards would see him too."

Disappointment flickers across Skeppy's face, but he plasters on a bright grin. "Sure. I mean, I'll get other chances, right?"

"But we can't just lower me down like that. They'll see me instantly," Fundy says.

"So we use the lights," Dream says. "We have approximately seven seconds before the backup generators kick in, so we'll just have to lure the Shadow guards away from the control room, then someone sneak in and switch the lights off." Dream glances back down at the main chamber, spying the tiny window of the control room they had just been in. "Of course, before the lights are switched off, someone would need to tie Fundy to the hook so he can steal the Treasure, and someone has to be here to lower the hook."

A moment of silence passes over the group.

Fundy laughs. "I like it. That means our route is secured, and all that's left is to send the calling card."

"Calling card?" Skeppy asks.

"Yeah. To get our target's Treasure to materialize, we need to make it known to them that their desires is something that can be stolen so we can change their cognition," Fundy says.

"The effect only lasts one day, though," Bad says. "We have to steal the Treasure that very same day, or we won't get another chance."

"Oh my God, I've always wanted to do something like that," Skeppy says. "Can I design the calling card? Please? Pretty please with a cherry on top?"

"Well, he's an artist, right? I think whatever Skeppy's gonna design is gonna be better than all of us combined," Sapnap says. "So, uh, we'll leave it to you, Skeppy."

"Question now is, when are we gonna send the calling card?" Fundy asks. "So that Skeppy can get it ready on time."

"Her exhibition ends on June sixth, so that gives us until next Saturday to steal it by," Skeppy says.

"To be honest, I'd want to get it over and done with," Bad says. "The next day we're all free is Friday, right? So why not send it on Friday?"

"Good idea," Dream says. "Skeppy, you're in charge of giving Marion the calling card."

Skeppy salutes him. "Aye, Cap'n. Leave it to me!"

"Alright," Dream says, clapping his hands. "We're done for today. Let's get outta here."

*

[5/25 - MONDAY - EVENING](#)

"Here are the things you needed, Mrs Armstrong."

Clay hands Mrs Armstrong the bag of groceries, which he has just purchased by her request from the supermarket just down the corner. Well, if Nick hadn't been in the bathroom when she called, Clay wouldn't have had to go and could have lazed around in bed the whole night. Especially considering how sore his limbs are.

"Thank you," Mrs Armstrong says. She pats the spot on the table next to her laptop. "You can leave them here. I'll sort them through later."

"I could do that, if you don't mind." Clay is well-acquainted with the most of the house by now, especially the kitchen.

"It's fine," Mrs Armstrong says, rising. "I'm about to make dinner. You could help with that, if you are so keen."

Make dinner, hmm? Clay hasn't a single shred of culinary skills in his body. If he can learn to make food by himself, perhaps he can make food to bring during their Palace runs to replenish everyone's energy. Of course, that would mean that he needs to buy food containers and...

"I'll be glad to."

Mrs Armstrong offers a hint of a smile; a rarity, Clay thinks, as he follows her to the kitchen. Judging from her grocery list, the item on the menu today is pasta, and, as Clay soon finds out, a copious amount of tomato sauce with a sprinkling of sugar and mozzarella cheese.

"How is school life?" Mrs Armstrong asks. "It's about a month and a half into the year."

"It's fine," Clay says, strapped for words, because it is absolutely impossible for him to tell Mrs Armstrong exactly what's been going on in school. Despite getting Kronos' fired, thus rendering his minor offences void, Clay is still uneasy about the first month of school.

"I think you did rather well on the examinations, all things considered," Mrs Armstrong says. "Your only problem being your Literature. How is Mr Soot, speaking of which?"

Soot? Oh, right, Wilbur. "He's a good teacher."

"I thought so. He's an author, after all."

Wilbur's an author? That's news to Clay.

"Just remember, I'm not going to tolerate any signs of misbehaviour, alright? Keep yourself in line, and the year will fly by," Mrs Armstrong says. The words sound harsh, but not so much when spoken in her motherly tone. Clay can sense a bond forming between himself and Mrs Armstrong.

I am thou, thou art I. Thou has acquired a new vow...It shall become the wings of rebellion that breaketh thy chains of captivity. With the birth of the Empress Persona, I have obtained the winds of blessing that shall lead to freedom and new power...

Small talk wanes after that. Mrs Armstrong instructs him to watch the pasta while she goes to call for Nick. Clay does, eyes never leaving the pot, as the macaroni boils.

The pasta is delicious - even more so since he's helped in the preparation. Clay wonders if he'd be able to make enough during another Palace run to feed those four other hungry mouths. Nick is half-asleep when eating dinner, unfocused eyes staring straight forward as he shovels pasta into his mouth mindlessly. Clay polishes his plate in record time and offers to help wash the dishes. Mrs Armstrong utters a word of thanks, and she heads up to her office once more.

"Hey, don't plant your face into the pasta," Clay says, whacking Nick on the head. "Save some for Floris."

"He's got his dog food, ain't he?"

"Ouch."

"Fine, fine. Not feeling that hungry anyways," Nick says. He heads up to the room and Clay heads to the kitchen, suddenly feeling rather energized and ready to wash some plates.

*

Chapter End Notes

Empress Arcana rank 0 -> 1

Proficiency +3 (learning to cook)

Kindness +3 (washing dishes)

Please Have Some Snacks

Chapter Summary

when clay forgot to go for his counselling session last week

Chapter Notes

writing while watching techno's stream no joke phone in front of me while laptop was open to this page was kinda shook when i heard that techno joined dream smp :0

dream would have gotten a reverse arcana with sapnap if not for the fact that they aren't used in p5/p5r

Gordon, Shelia and Derek are OCs

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

5/26 - TUESDAY - LUNCHTIME

"Good afternoon. May Mr Clay from Class 2B come down to the Counselling Room immediately?"

Clay shoots up from his seat, as if he just sat on a pin. What the hell? Why is he being called...? Oh. Clay exhales forcefully through his nose. Right. He forgot to go for counselling last week, and since they went to the Palace yesterday...

"It's not that bad," Darryl says, cringing at the scraping of Clay's chair against the floor. "I went for it already."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah, she has snacks."

Clay resists the urge to roll his eyes. It's a waste of time, or at least he thinks so. Floris, on the other hand, seems pretty excited, squirming about in his bag, drawing a few stares, but honestly Clay can't be bothered at the moment. The makeshift counselling room happens to be beside the nurse's office, like Dr Montgomery said during the assembly. When Clay enters, he finds Dr Montgomery at her desk on the computer, which she shuts off the moment she hears the creak of the door.

"I've been expecting you. Come on in," Dr Montgomery says, moving from the rolling chair to the plush couch. She waves at the collection of snacks on the table, ranging from Pocky to Calbee chips to Snickers bars. "Please, take whatever you'd like."

Clay ends up reaching for a Kit Kat and chomping on it. He grabs a box of Pocky for Floris and shoves it into his bag.

"So, Clay...do you mind if I call you that?"

"Sure."

"Clay, how are you feeling today?"

"Pretty good."

"How's school?"

"I'm keeping up."

"That's impressive," Dr Montgomery says. "Considering that you just transferred into the school..." She trails off. "Is there anything you'd like to tell me, Clay? Perhaps, regarding the incident with Mr Krones?"

At the mention of his name, Clay's expression goes stony. He shakes his head. "I have nothing to say about him."

"I see." Dr Montgomery hums. "It may do you some good, though, if you talk about your experiences. If you don't want to now, that's fine too."

Clay watches her like a hawk, as she unwraps a piece of chocolate and pops it into her mouth. He has never gone for counselling, but is it supposed to make you feel more agitated? He reaches for another Kit Kat, crunching down on it.

"Clay...would it be too much if I asked you for some help?" Montgomery asks. "You see, I get this...this feeling that you are somewhat of a special individual."

Where is this coming from? Clay finishes his Kit Kat and disposes the wrappers into the bin on Montgomery's table. "Go on."

"You see, I am in the middle of my research, regarding cognition," Montgomery says. Clay perks up, now ultra-sensitive to the word. "I was hoping that you could help me with it."

"I don't get anything in return," Clay points out. "Besides, aren't you supposed to, uh, counsel me or something?"

"Of course, of course," Montgomery says. "We can still meet up weekly, or whenever you'd like. In exchange for helping me with my research, I can...um..." Clay can almost see the gears turning in her head. "I can teach you tips and tricks to relieve stress, anxiety, stuff like that."

That would be useful, especially since he can make use of it in the Metaverse, being a world of cognition and all. It's amazing just what a simple trick of the mind can do there. "Sounds good."

"Great," Dr Montgomery says, holding out her hand, which Clay shakes firmly. "We have a deal."

I am thou, thou art I. Thou has acquired a new vow...It shall become the wings of rebellion that breaketh thy chains of captivity. With the birth of the Councillor Persona, I have obtained the winds of blessing that shall lead to freedom and new power...

"Alright, so the tip for today..."

When lunchtime's over, Clay leaves the Counselling Room for his next class, Floris squirming about in his bag.

"It wasn't so bad after all," Floris says, managing to unzip his bag and pokes his head out. "And I wonder what this research of hers is about..."

Clay has to admit, he's curious as well.

*

5/26 - TUESDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

The sound of sniffles alarms Clay when he steps out of the changing room after clocking out. Shelia, Ruby's landlord's daughter, isn't here today, so she probably can't be the source of Ruby's tears. He sits down beside her, patting her shoulder, waiting for her to cry it out. He isn't quite sure what to say in situations like these, but surely Ruby doesn't want to hear meaningless platitudes right now. Ruby becomes coherent after what seems like eternity, rubbing her eyes, a string of apologies pouring from her mouth.

"It's not your fault," Clay tells her. Ruby sniffs, looking down at the ground, her phone lying on the table, screen black. "What's wrong?"

"Eviction...notice," Ruby sniffles. "I...We couldn't pay rent in time, even...even when...now we're gonna have to live on the streets and...and..."

That's bad. That's really, really bad.

"We'll have to move out next week...It's not fair! He keeps doubling rent and he knows we don't have enough money to...to...Maybe I'll just have to...switch jobs and do what Jude's doing. I'm sure that'll get us enough money..."

"Are you sure about that?" Clay asks.

"It's...the only choice," Ruby says, voice nasally. "If I can...I can find someone who would pay me a lot of money to..."

"Hey," Floris says, voice muffled by the bag. "We need to help her, before she does something she'll regret."

But how? Clay wonders.

"Ask for her landlord's full name."

Clay turns to Ruby, eyes puffy and cheeks blotchy. He steels himself and asks, "What's your landlord's full name?"

"H-Huh?" Ruby looks up at him. "It's Gordon Harvem. Um...what are you going to do with that...?"

"Don't worry about it," Clay says. "Want to go and get some crepes?"

Ruby smiles sadly. "Sorry, I think I'll pass today. Gotta start packing you know."

Clay watches as Ruby leaves first, the door swinging shut behind her. He unzips the bag, and Floris sticks his head out.

"What are you gonna do with that information?" Clay asks.

"We're going to change her landlord's heart, of course," Floris says. "Though, this is pretty serious stuff. She's going to move out next week, right, so we'd better get going into Mementos ASAP."

Like what they did with Nevada. They could beat up that Shadow and send it back to the real person, to force the person to have a change of heart. They'd go in tomorrow, then, if everyone can

make it. Clay sends a message into the group chat, then picks his bag up and decides to make his way home as well.

*

5/26 - TUESDAY - EVENING

"This is a movie theatre?"

"Yes," Clay says, hands in his pockets. "Yes it is."

Justine is scrutinizing each movie poster, while Caroline is staring at the popcorn machine. From a distance, of course, not with her little face pressed up against its glass. She was absolutely not demanding a bowl of popcorn before Clay decided to step in. Justine points at a movie poster, a film poster showing a survival horror movie. He remembers this, the fourth installment of the Manhunt series, where a man finds himself in the wilderness, trying to survive while hiding from several "Hunters" who try to kill him. Honestly, it just keeps getting more and more intense and interesting; few series can brag about that.

The problem is that one needs to be at least eighteen years old to view this movie, which Justine and Caroline are decidedly not.

"R-18," Clay says, tapping his knuckle against the poster, at the corner where the rating is printed. "You guys are too young."

"Too young?" Caroline glares at him.

"I can assure you that we are much older than you are, inmate," Justine says. Clay shivers. How old *are* they?

"Your appearance isn't going to pass for an adult," Clay says. "Come on, let's pick a G-rated movie."

"But it's boring!" Caroline complains.

"You've never tried it," Clay says, scratching his head.

"The inmate is quite correct, Caroline," Justine says. "We are here to see the world for ourselves. We should not deny a chance to experience the world...no matter how limited it may be."

At least someone among them sees sense.

"Alright, inmate! Lead the way!"

Clay sighs. He leaves them at a bench, telling them to wait like good little girls, and heads on to the booth to buy tickets.

All in all, the movie wasn't too bad, though Clay can hardly stand the secondhand embarrassment when several parents glare at him for bringing two rowdy children to the cinema. For spiritual beings who claim to be much older than Clay himself, they sure don't act like it. The twin wardens are still discussing the movie excitedly when they walk out. Clay relaxes. At least Caroline isn't complaining, and that's a good thing.

"Alright, inmate, you can consider this assignment done," Caroline says, brandishing her baton.

"Indeed," Justine says. "Caroline, do you think our Master would agree to place a theatre in the

Velvet Room?"

Caroline looks starry-eyed at the idea. Clay doesn't think that Igor would ever agree to something like that, but there's no harm in trying.

"We'll call you next time we have an assignment for you, inmate," Caroline says. "So don't go slacking off now!"

"It's time to go back to your fleeting moment of rest, inmate," Justine says. Clay rubs at his neck. Jeez, imagine getting bossed around by two ten-year-olds. Still, he can feel the distance between them closing...

After escorting Caroline and Justine back to the Velvet Room, he decides to head home as well.

*

5/27 - WEDNESDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"The last time we came here, this thing wouldn't budge."

Sapnap walks up to the wall that had been blocking their passage further down into Mementos. The moment he approaches it, the wall begins to crumble, the ground rumbling, and the red veins glow hotly. Soon, the wall is nothing but a mountain of dust on the ground, revealing behind it a stationary escalator and a way further down.

"Just how big is this place?" Skeppy asks as the group heads down the escalator, footsteps clunking against the metal steps.

"Uh, I dunno," Fundy says. "Astronomically huge. That's the feeling I'm getting."

"Man, can't you be a little more specific?" Sapnap grumbles. They've reached the next platform, the wind howling even louder. If Dream stops to listen, he'd liken the howls to screams of anguish. He shakes his head. Nah, he must be imagining things. The red veins that run along the walls seem to be pulsing even more violently now.

"Well, you can't expect me to know everything!" Fundy groans. He leaps into the air and transforms into the Fundybus. The group gets in, and Dream steps on the accelerator.

"Okay, so we have two targets today," Bad says. "One is of a bully who's been extorting money from other students. Goes to our school. His name is Jung Taekwon. The other is the landlord of Dream's friend, Gordon Harvem."

"Yeah, sounds about right," Fundy says. "Oh, look! One's just up ahead!"

The void right in front of them, a mass of red swimming in black, appears to be the same as the one that they had found Shadow Nevada in. Without hesitation (although it would really help if Skeppy stops screaming in his ear), Dream floors it, sending the Fundybus tumbling through the portal. The Fundybus emerges on the other end, skidding to a stop in front of a Shadow. Or rather, *two* Shadows, a man and a girl much younger than he. Dream narrows his glare. He recognizes the woman - she is the one who had taunted Ruby the other day. The man must be her father.

"Who are you?" Gordon asks, black flames circling around him. His daughter, Shadow Shelia, giggles haughtily.

"Hey, don't you know what you're doing is illegal? Stop destroying the lives of two people trying to make ends meet!" Dream shouts.

"Destroying their lives? I need money to survive in this world too! What's wrong with making use of people to get it?" Gordon huffs, arms folded.

"You bastard..." Sappnap starts, but does not get very far, because the next moment, both Shadow Gordon and Shadow Shelia burst into their Shadow forms, two hovering fairies, their wings fluttering and scattering glitter everywhere. Shadow Gordon wears a crown and wields a sword, dressed in a mauve vest and tight-fitting pants, while Shadow Shelia levitates comfortably in her flowing green dress, a tiara perched on her head.

[Dream](#) throws out a hand and summons Shiisaa to take the damage from the Frei balls. Dream hisses, skin burning like it's on fire. He switches Personas, Makami rising from within him and casts twin tornadoes at the fairies, both of whom zip past the cyclones easily. The cyclones crash into the wall behind them, barely making a scratch.

"That all you've got?" Shadow Gordon rushes Dream, and Dream barely pulls up his dagger fast enough to parry the attack. The blade is an inch from his face. A second later and Dream's head would have been chopped clean off. Dream overpowers Shadow Gordon, hurling him back. Shadow Gordon does not have time to recover, unable to maneuver in midair, before Bad pelts him with bullets.

"Dad!" Shadow Shelia cries, raising her hand, a green light enveloping Shadow Gordon. Immediately, his wounds heal, flesh knitting in seconds. Dream clutches the grip of his dagger. God, this is going to take longer than he would like.

"Fundy, Skeppy, Bad, focus on Shelia! Sappnap, you're with me! Go!" Dream cries, and begins to move in towards Shadow Gordon. It seems like only Shadow Shelia can cast healing spells, so it's best to incapacitate her first, then they can take their time with Shadow Gordon. He hears Fundy's screech from behind him followed by a thump. Dream forces himself to focus on his own enemy, Shadow Gordon once more loosing that barrage of Frei balls. Dream whips Shiisaa into existence once more. A Frei ball nicks his cheek, skin hissing where it burns. Dream summons Jack Frost, slapping his own healing spell on him. The burning is no more, but it is probably going to leave a scar.

"Take this, you motherfucker!" Sappnap shrieks, leaping into the air, cudgel raised above his head. He slams it down on Shadow Gordon's head, knocking the senses out of him. Shadow Gordon lets out an unholy scream, crashing to the ground, sword torn from his grasp, spinning about on the ground a fair distance from him. Dream stomps on it, keeping it just out of Shadow Gordon's grip. Fundy and the others seem to have Shadow Shelia on the ground as well.

"Wrap it up, guys." Dream grins, as some would describe, maniacally. He picks up Shadow Gordon's sword and twirls it between his fingers, back turned to the fairies, deafened by the sound of shots behind him. The sword suddenly vanishes from his hands, and Dream spins on his heels. Shadow Gordon and Shadow Shelia have reverted to their human selves, on their knees, blubbering and crying.

["You'd](#) better give back all the money you stole from Ruby," Dream says. "Or else next time, there will really be no mercy."

"Y-Yes," Shadow Gordon's voice cracks. "We will. I promise."

"Good," Dream says, watching in satisfaction as Shadow Gordon and Shadow Shelia disappear,

leaving nothing but a theme park brochure behind. Dream picks it up and shoves it into his coat.

"Right, now that that's done," Bad says, dusting his hands. "Let's go."

Fundy transforms into his bus state once more. Dream revs the engine. Once the final door clicks shut, he drives the Fundybus out of there.

Next up, Shadow Jung Taekwon.

*

5/27 - WEDNESDAY - EVENING

"You okay?"

Clay walks into the room, towel around his neck. Nick is sitting at his desk, the same pendant in his hand, a forlorn look on his face. Nick flicks the pendant into the air, and catches it by the chain.

"I never did tell you, right? About that day?" Nick says.

"Which day?"

"The day when my brother died," Nick says. He shakes his head. "He was trying to save me from a stupid truck. I was goddamned stupid. It was raining, I wasn't thinking, and the next thing I knew, there was this truck speeding at me and Neil...Neil pushed me away. They pronounced him dead on the spot."

Clay bites his lip.

"If only I hadn't been so stupid and..." Nick slams his fist on the table, the pendant rattling against the wood. He lets out a groan of frustration. "He should have been the one to survive, not me! I'm worthless and-"

"Okay, I'm gonna have to stop you right there," Clay says, putting a hand on Nick's shoulder. Nick lowers his eyes.

"No need to make me feel better, Clay."

"It's not about making you feel better," Clay hisses. "Look, will blaming yourself solve anything? Do you think Neil would have wanted this?"

Hearing this, Nick stands abruptly, shoving Clay away, lips pulled back into a snarl. "I should've known. You're just like everyone else." Without another word, he drops the pendant into his desk drawer and leaves the room, slamming the door behind him. Clay flinches.

Floris peeks out from behind the wall of Clay's top bunk. "That didn't go so well."

"Yeah, so observant of you," Clay mutters. He climbs up the stairs and settles in his bed, staring up at the ceiling. He was feeling terribly sleepy before, eyelids weighing down like lead, but now, with his brain whirring, he's wide awake. His stomach does flips, his heart going at a mile a minute. Why in the world is he getting so worked up over this? Tomorrow, he'd apologize. Simple as that.

"You're so dense," Floris mumbles. His snout digs into Clay's arm, tiny body rising and falling with his breaths.

Despite how the conversation ended, Clay can't help but feel that Nick has given him a little insight into his problems...

*

5/28 - THURSDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"So, what made you decide to come after all this time?"

Ouch. Those words bite like jaws of ice. Clay scratches his head, putting the watering can aside. He's just finished harvesting the potatoes from the planter and is now watering the melons. They hadn't spoken the entire time this session, getting to work silently on opposite ends of the room. The first words Niki says to him and she springs this question?

"Uh," Clay starts, hurriedly thinking of excuses.

"You're busy, I get it," Niki says. At the same time, her phone begins to ring, and Niki picks it up.

"Hello?" she says, leaning with her back against the wall, phone in gloved hand. "Oh, Derek! Yes, how are you?"

Clay goes back to what he's doing, picking up the watering can and continuing to water the melons. In the silence of the room and to distract himself from the humdrum of the work, Clay can't help but eavesdrop on her conversation.

"Yes, I'm doing fine, thank you for asking," Niki says. "...Oh, but Mother would not...oh, I suppose I could..." She trails off, her earlier enthusiasm gone. "Okay, I will text you. Bye, pumpkin!"

With that, she slips her phone back into her apron pocket. "So, are you done with the melons?"

"Done? Yeah, I'm done," Clay says, placing the watering can onto the table in the middle of the room as Niki strides over. "Who was that?"

"Huh? Oh, uh, Derek, my boyfriend," Niki says. "He's a wonderful person, but my parents don't really approve of him."

Clay hums. "Maybe they just don't understand."

"I agree," Niki says, nodding. "I'm just waiting till we graduate so we can live together and I don't need my parents' permission for that."

"I see."

"Well," Niki says, patting soil from her apron, "it's almost time to go. Do you mind locking up and returning the key to the office? I've got to go meet Derek." She drops the key into Clay's waiting hand. She picks her bag up and waves goodbye to him, then leaves the room, her footsteps sounding out in the hallway. Clay takes one more look at his batch of melons, then proceeds to lock up. The sun is getting rather low in the sky now. Perhaps he should be heading back...

*

Councillor arcana rank 0 -> 1

Charm +3 (working at convenience store)

Sun arcana rank 6 -> 7

Proficiency +3 (watched movie)

Aeon arcana rank 1 -> 2

Chariot arcana rank 4 -> 5

Kindness +3 (gardening club)

Hanged Man rank 1 -> 2

Museum of Vanity: Life Will Change

Chapter Summary

stealing marions treasure

Chapter Notes

almost 1 month since the story began and we're at the end of may. it'll probably take another 4-5 months lol omg i wonder if people are willing to follow a story for that long

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

5/28 - THURSDAY - EVENING

"Hey."

Clay looks up from where he's sweeping the floor of their room, in addition to picking up dirty laundry off the ground. Nick is standing there with a sheepish expression on his face, having just come up from dinner. Clay forces himself to relax. Getting tense now wouldn't help anyone. He can feel Floris' beady eyes on him watching them from this top bunk.

"Sorry about last night," Nick says. "I was being a dick. You just cared about me and I snapped at you." He dips his head, eyes on the ground. "Sorry about that."

Clay shakes his head. "I have to apologize too. Was an insensitive asshole." Clay laughs. An awkward silence descends upon them. Clay's fingers tighten around the broom.

Nick breaks the quiet first, laughing. "Well, aren't we idiots?"

Clay finds himself smiling. "Dude, if you've got any problems, you can tell me, you know. We practically live together, we've nearly died together, killed Shadows together."

"Yeah," Nick says, scratching his head bashfully. "So, um, the thing is, my mom's been getting on my case about my schoolwork and life since Neil's dead. It's like she sees me as another Neil. Makes me his favourite foods, cares too much about my grades. That's why I study - to shut her up." Nick sighs. "I sort of want her to move on, and...and not keep harping over Neil, you know?"

"Grieving doesn't work that way."

For a moment, Clay is afraid he said the wrong thing again, but Nick chuckles, eyeing the desk drawer sadly. "Yeah, it doesn't. And I can attest to that. It's not just my mom. My dad too. Gives me gifts, wants me to live a good life." He plops into his chair. "If he really wanted me to live a good life, he wouldn't have filed for divorce."

Sounds like Nick's got issues with both parents. Neither can let go, and they are coping with it differently, with Nick caught in the crossfire. Still, Clay is glad Nick trusts him enough to tell him

this.

"Hey," Floris calls from Clay's bunk. "Your phone's flashing." He paws at Clay's phone, and Clay lets out a girly shriek when Floris tips his phone off the edge of the bed, landing into Clay's waiting hand.

"What the hell?" Clay cries. Floris plods down the stairs to the ground floor and scrambles up Clay's back, clawing at his shirt. "Oi!" He perches on Clay's shoulder. Clay unlocks his phone, tapping on the Phantom Thief group chat notifications.

[Zak: YOOOOOOO](#)

Zak: Image

Zak: Image

Darryl: That looks way better than what I did

Zak: dont worry i'm sure u did great :)

Nick: fantastic

Me: that's actually really good

Me: How are we going to give it to marion, though

"Zak's her pupil, right? So he can hand it to her tomorrow," Fundy says. "That means that we have to get into the Palace first thing after school tomorrow."

"Alright," Clay says, typing into the chat.

Me: can you give it to her tomorrow? preferably before school lets out

Zak: yeah sure

Zak: im gonna be at her exhibit anyways. maybe i can just anonymously drop it or smtg

Darryl: that sounds dangerous. dont get caught!

Me: Great

Me: we're counting on you zak

Zak: leave it to be

*Zak: me**

Zak: bye shes coming home soon im gonna have to hide this calling card

Clay opens up the image file again. Honestly, it looks amazing. The same red-and-black colours are there, lining the card's borders. Letters and words of different fonts and sizes painstakingly cut out from different newspapers and magazines really stand out against the sharp background. Behind the message is their newly-designed logo, a red top hat with fire for eyes. It's perfect. Zak should be in charge of designing their calling cards next time, for their next target.

"Alright, it's best if you guys rest up," Floris says. "Tomorrow's going to be a tiring day."

"And we have the park cleanup on Saturday," Nick groans. He climbs into bed, tossing his sweater at Clay. Clay rolls it up into a ball and smacks him with it. Then, he freezes.

"Park cleanup?" Floris asks.

"What? Since when did we have a park cleanup?" Clay cries. "Why didn't I hear of this?"

"They announced it during homeroom for my class," Nick says.

That explains it. Clay never listens during homeroom. Or any other class, for that matter. Why didn't Darryl or Yao Yi mention it or anything?

"Yeah, after stealing the Treasure tomorrow, we should rest early too," Floris says. "Pushing your body so hard is just going to end in disaster."

"I have to agree with you on that," Nick says. "Okay, nighty-night!"

"Hey! Do your own laundry!" Clay hisses.

Floris laughs, ascending the stairs to Clay's bunk once again.

*

5/29 - FRIDAY - AFTERNOON

"Master."

"Zak?" Marion seems surprised. Zak strides up to her, calling card in hand, a troubled expression on his face. "Have you come to beg for forgiveness?"

"Forgiveness? Nothing of the sort," Zak says, holding up the calling card. "I found this outside our house, Master."

"You mean *my* house," Marion says snobbishly, snatching the card from Zak's hand. She furrows her brows, eyes scanning the words. Zak waits patiently beside her, hands tucked into his pockets.

"Rubbish," Marion says, crumpling the card in her hand, dropping the ball on the ground. "I have no time or energy to be wasting on petty criminals like these." Zak picks the ball from the ground, crushing it even further in his hands. He grins. Bringing the calling card to Master herself is just one of many parts to his plan. He turns his back on his Master and walks towards the door, pausing right before it slams open in his face.

The man who dashes past him carries another calling card in his hand. Zak leans against the wall outside the door, arms folded, listening in.

"Miss Marion! The Phantom Thieves...their calling cards are everywhere!"

"What?" The rage in Marion's voice is entertaining. "Tear them down, immediately!"

"But Miss-"

"Well? What are you waiting for?" Marion shrieks. "When I say now, you go now!"

Zak jumps as the man rushes out of the room, headed down the staircase towards the lobby. Zak glances back at Marion who bites at a polished nail. For a single second, he can see Marion's face darken, and he can almost sense the animosity emanating from her being. The Curator of the

Museum of Vanity flashes faintly before his eyes, in her evening gown, with her fan in hand. Zak blinks, and the image is gone.

He heads down the stairs, a slight skip in his step, making for Lancer Lane.

*

5/29 - FRIDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

Dream hops into the safe room through the open window, adjusting his mask. Behind him, he hears the snapping of hooks and the swoosh of wire as it coils back into the contraption. He moves towards the door, uneasiness creeping up on him. The Palace security level is so high that he can *feel* it from behind the door. Dream opens the door a crack, only to come face to face with a Shadow.

"Whoa!" Dream summons Jack Frost, instantly freezing the Shadow and shattering it with a bullet to the core. Pieces of Shadow rain on the ground, and Dream shoves his pistol back into its holster. The coast is clear now. Dream glances left and right. If he remembers correctly, the control room is that way, and the back room is opposite the control room...

As per the plan, Dream, Skeppy and Fundy head towards the back room, while Sapnap and Bad run in the opposite direction headed for the control room. On the way, they run into a couple of Shadows, which they dispatch easily. Once they're in the back room, Dream slams the door behind him, shoving furniture against it to keep Shadows out. Skeppy scoops up a coil of loose rope.

"Alright, Skeppy! Tie me up!" Fundy cries, standing at the edge of the platform. Dream snorts.

"Kinky."

Fundy shoots him a glare. and what looks to be a middle finger...except it's a middle paw. Dream didn't know foxes' paws can bend like that. Skeppy binds Fundy to the hook, making sure the knot is extra tight. Skeppy shows a thumbs-up to the window of the control room, and in the next second, they are plunged into darkness. Beneath them, Shadow Marion and her guards are panicking. Dream pushes the green button on the wall and the winch begins to move, uncoiling the wire that lowers Fundy down past the wall of lasers.

"Dream, now!" Skeppy shouts. Dream slams his fist against the red button, and the wire coils once more, taking Fundy, and the Treasure, with it. Skeppy unties Fundy, grabbing the Treasure - a painting on canvas on a small easel covered in cloth - and tucks it under his arm. There is a banging on the door, then Sapnap and Bad shrieking on the other end. Dream hurriedly moves the furniture aside, throwing open the door and letting Sapnap and Bad through. Sapnap kicks the door shut, keeping the Shadow guards out.

"Did you..." Bad starts. "Did you get...the Treasure?" He pants, one hand against the wall and the other grabbing his kneecap.

"Yeah," Fundy says with a sharp-toothed grin.

"Problem," Sapnap says between huffs, holding a finger up. "Shadows. Outside. Too many...to fight..."

"Is there another way out? Like an air vent or something?" Fundy looks around.

"Window," Dream says. "There was a window near the platform." He begins ascending the ladder, without waiting for his teammates' responses. With no other choice, the group follows after him,

leaping from hanging platform to hanging platform above Shadow Marion's head. Dream reaches the tiny window leading out of the museum. It's quite a drop. Thankfully, they managed to find more Ender Pearls during their trip to Mementos. Dream drops the Pearl, the small sphere gaining in speed, hitting the ledge below.

Dream lands on his feet and he looks up, his team following suit, each dropping their own Ender Pearls.

This ledge runs along the wall of the museum, and Dream drops down in the exterior garden, taking out a Shadow with a bullet to the head. The Shadow collapses and bursts into dust. The team makes their way past the garden, darting between rosebushes and shrubbery, passing under arches till they've reached the entrance of the museum, the Treasure safe in Skeppy's possession.

"That took forever!" Skeppy says, attempting to wipe sweat off his forehead, only for the back of his hand to hit his mask.

"Treasure!" Fundy cries, hopping about. "I can't wait anymore! Open it! Lemme see!"

"Whoa there," Dream holds Fundy back. "Dude, why not just-"

"I can't wait anymore either!" Skeppy cries, laying the painting onto the ground. "I wanna see what it is too!"

Here comes Fundy number two.

Skeppy whips off the cloth, and the team gasps.

The word TRASHY BRATS is written across the canvas, splattered with paint, or ink, or dye, Dream isn't sure. All that he knows is they've been duped. Terribly.

"My plan worked flawlessly."

Dream's head shoots up, eyes meeting Shadow Marion's as she saunters over to them, her fan in hand. She waves her fan, and the Shadow guard behind her brings out another canvas on an easel, placing it right next to her with a thump. It whips off the cloth covering the canvas, revealing the Sylvaria, though this one looks just slightly different from the one Dream remembers. Instead of gray fog marring the woman's arms, she holds a baby wrapped in cloth. The baby's eyes are closed, its pudgy hands curled into fists.

"You tricked us!" Sapnap shouts.

"Of course I did," Shadow Marion says. "Did you think I would really let you steal my Treasure? Foolish brats."

"Is it just me, or is there something different about the Sylvaria?" Bad asks.

"This is...Master? What is this...What does this mean?" Skeppy asks, taking a step forward. "The baby...why is it there?"

"This was the original painting," Shadow Marion says without missing a beat. "Painted by your mother, might I add."

"Wait," Skeppy holds up a hand. "My mother? What do you mean? Master?" Panic rises in Skeppy's voice. "Tell me!"

Shadow Marion snarls. "Shut up, you lowly brat! A painting like that would never sell! You have to inject mystery, hence the fog. With the object of the mother's smile hidden, it would pique the interest of even the laymen, the clueless public. What the woman is smiling at, what could have caused such a smile, will never be known, and therein lies the profit. Your mother knew nothing about what the public wants."

"Master, you knew my mother?" Skeppy asks.

"Of course I knew her!" Marion cries. "Her talent was immeasurable, and it was obvious even to a person who knew nothing about art. We met at an art convention, after she had you, of course. I invited her to stay at my house, to handle the publicity and administrative matters for her. All she had to do was paint." Marion chuckles. "That foolish woman. She was the perfect cash cow with her weak body and financial situation."

"How dare you!" Skeppy shouts.

["Skeppy!"](#) No!" Dream reaches for Skeppy's arm, but Skeppy is faster. His mask disappears from his face as he pulls the katana from its sheath. The temperature drops drastically and a cold gale swirls around them. Shadow Marion laughs. Skeppy's katana, blade lined with ice, cuts cleanly through her, or rather, what appears to be nothing more than her incorporeal form.

Shadow Marion sinks beneath the ground, the usual black flames bursting from her body, incinerating her from the inside out. The Shadow guards have long since vanished, leaving them a grand arena to do battle on. It looks like combat is inevitable at this point. Dream draws his dagger, as do the others their melee weapons. Taking Shadow Marion's place are several frames, each one depicting a facial feature: two eyes, a nose and a mouth.

"That's right, Zak! Your mother died the night she completed her painting. Her masterpiece, the Sylvaria," Shadow Marion says. "She had a heart attack as she was showing me her painting. There was nothing I could do to help her. Not if I wanted the all the wealth the painting could possibly give me!"

"You what...?" Skeppy's voice has gone considerably lower, barely audible. "You...Master! You left my mother to die!"

"If she lived, I could not have become as successful as I am now!" Shadow Marion cackles. "Don't you see, foolish child? You can only succeed by using other people! The masses are nothing more than stepping stones for the success of the chosen few!"

"You *bastard!*" Skeppy raises his sword above his head, bringing it down on the portrait of the nose, slicing it in two. The portrait lies on the ground, lifeless, in two halves.

"That hurt!" the mouth portrait yells. The left eye glints, and a pillar of fire shoots up from beneath Skeppy's feet.

"Skeppy!" Bad shouts, rushing over, healing magic at the tip of his fingers. Sappap slams his cudgel down on the portrait of the mouth, but unlike the first time, the portrait does not go down instantly. Instead, the mouth cackles and deflects the attack, sending Sappap's own raw power back at him. Sappap is thrown across the garden, landing hard on his back with a grunt.

The right eye flashes, and the nose portrait mends itself, the tear in the portrait no longer existent.

Dream summons Makami, sending a tornado spiraling towards the portraits, cutting through both the nose and the mouth portraits and dicing them into mincemeat. An icicle shoots up from beneath

Dream's feet, and he would have been skewered if not for his reflexes. Dream doesn't stop moving, dancing about to the beat of the magic, to the rhythm of icicles spearing up from the ground beneath them.

Skeppy brings his katana down on the eye portraits with his ice-enhanced blade, ripping the portrait to shreds, and Bad shoots the last one out of the air, filling it with holes, the final ruined portrait falls. All four portraits sink through the ground, morphing into black ooze that forms Shadow Marion's human form once more. She looks infinitely more exhausted this time round, sweat glistening on her forehead, thick mascara running down her cheeks. Her breaths are heavy, chest heaving, as she glares up at them, or rather, four guns and one slingshot.

"You killed my mother," Skeppy growls. "For the sake of your money."

"It was a necessary evil!" Shadow Marion shouts. "I-"

"I don't wanna hear it!" Skeppy starts shooting, a storm of bullets assaulting Shadow Marion, piercing through her body, forcing screams from her body. "I don't wanna hear excuses from a murderer!"

Shadow Marion holds her palm out, a gigantic paintbrush materializing in her palm. With a single stroke, she draws an ellipse in the air, conjuring a shield, reflecting the bullets back at them. Dream ducks, dodging one of the ricocheting bullets. He hears Bad cry out, turns his head and finds Bad on one knee, the other bleeding from a bullet that pierced bone.

"You're open now!" Shadow Marion brandishes her brush, and several more Shadows, exact copies of herself, rise from the ground, dressed in differently-coloured robes. The one in blue throws out her hand, icicles rushing along the ground straight at Bad.

There is a flash of movement out of the corner of Dream's eye, sprinting so fast that Dream barely has time to summon his Persona. Goemon stands in the way, katana raised against the icicles. Skeppy stomps his foot on the ground, a wall of ice rising so high and so thick that the fake Shadow Marion's attack can hardly penetrate it.

"Skeppy!"

Skeppy's cheerful front is demolished, leaving naught but a tempestuous demon released from its prison. With one swing of his katana, he cleaves his ice wall, the bulk of it toppling over Shadow Marion and her clones.

"No!" Shadow Marion shrieks. A burst of fire merely punctures a hole in the ice wall. Marion screams and begins to run. The ice wall crushes two of her clones, while she and the other two manage to run to safety. But not for long. Dream and Fundy are waiting for her, striking her other two clones down with an electrical storm, a whirlpool of crackling sparks and razor blades of wind.

Shadow Marion grits her teeth as she summons more clones, fizzling in and out of existence, suffering from burns, some dozing off, some too panicked to act.

[This](#) is where it ends, Marion."

Skeppy storms over to her, each step heavy on the ground, his katana drawn. Shadow Marion waves her hand, shaking her head, blathering on about sparing her life. Shadow Marion's desperate words fall on deaf ears, as Skeppy lays the edge of his katana blade against her neck.

"You can only make copies, replicas. You can't make art because you can't see the true beauty in

it," Skeppy says. "You killed my mother for the sake of your wealth. That is something you have to pay with your life."

"Wait, Skeppy, don't-!" Bad shouts, running forward, arm outstretched. Shadow Marion lowers her head, closing her eyes, already accepting her fate.

"I'm not gonna kill you," Skeppy says, withdrawing his katana. "That's not beautiful at all. What's beautiful is when you live and atone for your sins. Never step foot in the world of art ever again."

"I...I understand," Shadow Marion is on her knees now, tears dripping from her chin and onto the ground. She dissolves into blue butterflies, a spiral of pretty butterflies that reach the heavens. Skeppy waves away his Persona and walks over to the true Treasure, the real Sylvaria. Dream will probably never know what goes on in his mind, now that he's staring at the genuine article, not Marion's defaced version.

"My mother painted this," Skeppy says.

"It really shows that she loved you," Fundy says. "She must have painted this thinking of you."

"Yeah," Skeppy says, once more tucking the painting under his arm. His eyes are shining, but he stares straight forward, and walks resolutely towards the exit, past the high arches of the entrance.

Behind them, the museum crumbles, rubble crashing into the earth. The Museum of Vanity has been successfully infiltrated and conquered, the evidence of change the magnificent sight of the fallen golden Palace, its insides a testament to the avarice of man.

*

Chapter End Notes

Chariot arcana rank 4 -> 5

Park Cleanup

Chapter Summary

tubbo

Chapter Notes

lol i just thought of an excellent plot twist and ive decided that im just not gonna censor the pancakes part lol it is just going to happen dun dun dun

also the dream team is finally reunited LMAO

before i get flak for this PLEASE please note that i know tubbo's name is toby not thomas but please bear with me

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

5/29 - FRIDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"So, this is the real Sylvaria."

Zak is staring at it with the others crowded around him. There is a renewed gentleness behind the mother's eyes, behind her smile, as she looks upon her infant child.

"A pity though," Floris says. "I doubt the public would accept this piece now, given how much Marion marketed her false work."

"Maybe it's better this way," Darryl says.

"Yeah. I think so too." Zak hugs the portrait. "So, uh, shall we head home?"

"Oh, right," Nick slaps his forehead. "I forgot you got kicked out."

They end up eating together at Valentine Hills, at the cheap diner (that Zak can actually afford, but just barely) near the station, all persons tired yet satisfied by the outcome of the heist today. They leave, full hearts and bellies, for home.

Tomorrow is...yet another battle Clay would have to contend with.

5/29 - FRIDAY - EVENING

"This movie sucks."

"No it doesn't!" Fundy cries. "Wait! No! Don't!" He chomps down on Clay's arm, and Clay screams, dropping the remote controller, which Floris snatches up in his jaws. He attempts to say

something to Clay, but Clay is having none of it. He makes another grab for Floris, managing to wrap his fingers around Floris' tail. Floris opens his mouth, dropping the remote controller, screeching.

"Oi, oi, what the fuck is happening here?" Nick yells over the din. The movie is still playing, the dog on-screen sticking out its tongue and wagging its tail. For what reason, Clay isn't sure.

"Floris bit me!" Clay cries, holding up his arm, two holes punctured into his arm, oozing blood. Nick clicks his tongue.

"What did you do this time?"

Clay ignores the triumphant "Hah!" from Floris, and rounds on Nick. "What the hell is that supposed to mean? Floris bit me first!"

"Floris doesn't go around biting people, from past experience," Nick points out. "The only thing biting are his words. So naturally you must have done something to incite his wrath."

"He tried to switch the TV off," Floris accuses. "Then he grabbed my tail."

"I only grabbed your tail because you bit me!"

Nick plucks the controller from the couch and switches the television off. "No one's getting any TV tonight. Okay? Sleep. Tomorrow's the stupid cleanup."

Clay remembers his school holding annual trips to the nearby mountain every summer holiday to pick up trash. Like a naive child, he went for the one during his freshman year, and was determined to skip every one after that. Unfortunately for him, that never happened.

"Oh, speaking of the cleanup, we're in different groups, right?" Clay says. He remembers seeing that email disseminated to all students about the cleanup, with the document attached to it listing the groups they're going to pick up trash in.

"Yeah," Nick says. "They're mixing classes and levels, so we'll be picking up trash with freshman and seniors."

Clay pulls a face. "What if I don't know anyone?"

"Then make new friends."

"What if I can't make new friends?"

"Then die."

Clay sighs, flipping Nick off. He picks himself up from the couch before he gets blood on the couch, headed for the first aid kit in the kitchen. Thank goodness Mrs Armstrong is trapped upstairs in her room in a video conference. With that person whose name she's been muttering under her breath. Blade...something. Or something Blade.

When he returns to bed, Floris is already curled up and asleep. On his pillow, no less. Clay decides that he's had enough of fox fangs (once bitten, twice shy) and settles onto the bed, head taking up minimal space on the pillow. God, it's uncomfortable, but it sure beats another chomp to the arm.

*

"It's *hot*."

Clay fans himself the moment he steps out of the train station, dressed in his school jersey, the required outfit for this event. The cleanup is supposed to take place at Helen Park, the biggest park in the entire city, smack dab in the middle of the city, a ten minutes' walk from his convenience store job. Because that's the same park where he ate hot dog buns with Ruby.

"No kidding," Floris says, wriggling about in the bag. Clay elbows him, because people are *staring*, only to receive a smack from Floris' tail in return.

The station square at this time is teeming with students, dressed in the glaring red-and-white jersey of Enderlands High, all headed for the same place, walking along the same road. Okay, maybe the passers-by weren't staring at Floris' misbehaviour but rather at the congregation of students in embarrassingly-bright jerseys headed for Helen Park. The spotlight effect is harsh.

"Man," Nick says, wiping at his brow. "At least Zak doesn't have to do this."

"Yeah, right. He can just rest at home today," Clay says. "What are we doing out here on a Saturday anyway?"

"School. Park cleanup." Nick brushes a lock of hair, wet with sweat, out of his brow. "This is the first time they've actually planned such a thing."

"Probably some damage control," Floris says. "After the whole Krones' thing blew up."

"We got popular," Nick says, hands behind his head, fingers clasped. "Though for the totally wrong thing."

When the trio walk by the entrance to a seedy alleyway, Clay hears it. The unmistakable sound of potential conflict.

["Excuse](#) me, I have to be on my way. Please let go."

"Let go? But I'm just gettin' started, pretty boy."

Clay glances around. None of the other students seem to have noticed, or perhaps they did and decided to remain willfully ignorant of the conversation.

"I said, let go!" There is a rising panic in the boy's voice now, and Clay hears the sound of a scuffle coming from the alley.

Nick gulps, dipping his head. "We...We're gonna be late."

Clay pauses, mind going a mile a minute, palms clammy. He clenches his fists, then shoves his bag to Nick, Floris yelping. He leaps out of the bag and lands deftly on the ground. "You can go on ahead. I'll catch up with you." Phone in hand, thumb hovering over the Meta-Nav button (just in case), he strides down the alleyway, sidestepping rows of green-tinted wine bottles and patches of moss. When he turns the corner, he sees a man towering over a younger boy, about Clay's age, in the bright red school jersey, pushed against the wall, scrambling and kicking.

"Hey, let him go," Clay says, trying to sound as intimidating as possible (and not show him that he's actually terrified inside). The man turns and glares at him, keeping the boy's collar scrunched up in one hand.

"Who're yo-OOF!"

[The](#) boy, whom Clay thought to be helpless, swiftly kicks the man in the nuts. The man howls in pain, grabbing at his nether regions, and the boy actually roundhouse kicks the man in the ass. His assailant lies on the ground, groaning, and the boy walks over to Clay, a small smile flitting across his face.

"Thanks," the boy says. "Didn't want to hurt him but he left me no choice."

Whoa. Clay stares at him. He's not much taller than Clay - probably a head shorter - but goddamn does he look good in that jersey. Clay hadn't even thought it was possible.

"You're from Enderlands too?" the boy asks, holding out a hand. Clay takes it. "The name's George Davidson. You can just call me George, though."

"C-Clay." Clay trips over his words. "I'm from Enderlands. Yeah. The ugly jersey and all."

George laughs. "It's not that ugly. Brown's a nice colour."

Clay cocks his head. "Brown?"

"He's colourblind."

"Colourblind?" George says with a shake of his head. Then he straightens. "Wait a minute, that means the jersey's..."

"Red," Clay says. "The jersey's actually red."

"Oh." George nods, looking somewhat sad. He brushes past Clay as he walks towards the exit. "Anyway, we shouldn't hang around here much longer, lest other shady guys like him come along."

"And we're going to be late."

"That too." George glances at his watch. "Very late." He glances down at Clay's feet. "Is that a fox? You have a pet fox?" The face he makes is priceless. Clay shrugs, scooping Floris up from the ground.

"Yes, he's my pet fox," Clay says, rubbing his head. "Isn't he cute?"

Floris gags. George reaches a hand out to pet him, and Floris' ears flatten against his head, purring at the touch. Goddamn it. Why doesn't Floris ever show this much affection to him or Nick?

"Hey!"

Clay looks up to see Nick still standing at the entrance to the alleyway, waving frantically, Clay's bag in his other hand. "If we want to be on time, we gotta sprint!"

"Coming!" Clay calls. George and Nick exchange brief greetings, then, dashing past several groups of unbothered students, the trio (plus Floris safely in Clay's bag) makes a beeline for Helen Park, stepping foot past the park gates right when the second hand strikes twelve.

*

[Someone](#) bumps Clay from behind. He glances back - it's the first-year boy in his team. What was his name again? Clay isn't sure they introduced themselves to him. He's been largely ignored the entire time, with only Floris for company. As it turns out, neither Darryl nor Nick made it into his team (and neither did George, Dream may add). Honestly, what are the chances of that happening?

Clay never realized this before, but picking up trash for a couple of hours is backbreaking work. By the time his trash bag is full, Clay is already suffering from a sore back, hobbling like an elderly man. Floris does help him pick trash up, knickknacks that he can carry in his mouth, but most of the time, he's resting in the shade, in the bushes, away from the hubbub of students.

It doesn't help that Eret, the student council president, is just yelling at people from the sidelines, armed with a megaphone and those ridiculously-big sunglasses of his. Of course students will slack off. Given the choice, Clay wouldn't be here either.

Midday cannot come sooner. Clay collects his food from the food stand set up in the park, near their gathering point, with student council members scooping steak and salad onto their plates. Clay searches for a park bench to eat the food, spotting neither Darryl nor Nick, and instead finding an empty space next to the first-year who was in his team, all alone, nibbling at his food.

[Clay](#) approaches him. "Mind if I sit with you?"

The boy's eyes are wide. He stares down at his food. "Yeah, sure."

They eat in silence for a while, then the boy says, out of the blue, "Sorry."

"What for?" Clay holds his piece of steak out for Floris, the fox wolfing it down with barely even a chew. He stabs the lettuce and shoves it into his mouth.

"For...that time on the train. And for calling you a delinquent," the boy says, fidgeting with his fork.

Oh. Clay recalls it now. This is the same boy on the train who tried giving up his seat to the elderly woman. The same boy that Krones warned. Clay waves his hand. "It's fine. It wasn't a big deal."

The boy hums, relaxing visibly. "If you say so."

Clay feeds Floris another bite of steak and attempts to feed him corn, which he shies away from.

"You...you have a good relationship with your fox," the boy says, then his eyes light up. "Can I pet him?"

"Sure," Clay says, grabbing Floris by his middle and drops him between himself and the boy. With Floris at his side, Clay suddenly seems a lot more approachable. Maybe. People seem to want to pet his fox.

"H-Hey! I do not consent to this-oh...oh that feels great," Floris mews as the boy runs his hand along Floris' back, scratching behind his ears. Clay pretends to gag. He's starting to think that the ones receiving special treatment are himself and Nick, rather than Darryl, and George and...and this boy...

"You know, you don't seem as bad as they say," the boy says. "I heard you lead a motorbike gang, you hijacked an airplane, you traffic in elephant tusks..."

"I drive without a license too," Clay says nonchalantly. Floris snorts, almost choking on his steak.

"I know that's not true," the boy says, laughing. "I'm Smith, Thomas Smith, but I'd rather you use 'Smith'."

"Alright, Mr Smith," Clay says. "I'm Clay, and you can just call me that."

"Really? But that's so...informal," Smith says. "Still, if that's what you want." He holds his fist out, and Clay taps his fist against Smith's.

Already, Clay can feel a faint bond forming between himself and Smith.

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast acquired a new vow. It shall become the wings of rebellion that breaketh thy chains of captivity. With the birth of the Faith Persona, I have obtained the winds of blessing that shall lead to freedom and new power...

"Everyone!" Eret's booming voice jolts Clay from his thoughts. Can the man just put away his megaphone for once? "Once you're done with lunch, you're dismissed! Dispose of your plates and cutlery in the trash bags over here!"

"Oh, it's time to go," Smith says. "I've got training coming up, so I gotta go."

"Training?"

"Yeah. Hacking. I participate in competitions," Smith says with a smile. "Well, I guess I'll see you around, Clay."

"Likewise."

Clay watches as Smith skips off, a certain bounce in his step that wasn't there before. He glances down at his plate, only to find the steak gone. Floris burps.

"Did you just..." Clay starts. "I'm gonna start throwing hands, Floris."

Floris sticks his tongue out, swiping away the sauce on his fur. Clay makes a grab for him, but Floris has already leapt off his lap, headed towards the park entrance.

*

[5/30 - SATURDAY - EVENING](#)

"That was fun," Nick says.

"It was terrible."

"I was being sarcastic."

"Now, now," Zak says, stealing one of Darryl's fries. Darryl glares at him. "No fighting, kids. This is a place of peace and tranquility."

"Not with all the students and businesspeople it isn't," Clay points out. "Besides, we're not arguing. Or fighting. *You* didn't have to go through that, Zak, so zip your mouth."

"Hey, that's mean," Zak says, pouting. "Tell them it's mean, Bad."

"I'm not Bad," Darryl mutters. "Clay, that was mean. Apologize."

"What? No," Clay says, popping a fish finger into his mouth. Then spits it back out, mouth wide open. Nick shoves a glass of water at him, which Clay downs gratefully. Floris snickers, whipping his tail at Clay for good measure.

"Karma," Zak says. Clay gives him the middle finger. "So, anyway, that exercise must have instilled some sense of responsibility into y'all. Don't pollute the land. Save the park. That sort of

thing. Oh, and our favourite - don't step on the grass."

"We stepped on a ton of grass," Nick says. "The other option was to float. Or, you know, just *not* pick up the trash."

"Anyway, that's not why we're gathered here," Darryl says, holding up a hand. "Zak, what's the status on Marion?"

"Oh, Master?" Zak drawls, stealing another of Darryl's fries. "She's, um, holed up in her room the whole time, barely speaking, barely eating or drinking. I had to force her to shower..."

"You pervert," Floris mumbles.

"I did *not* actually enter the bathroom with her, just so you know," Zak says, sounding highly offended. "If anything, I was being a good student to a terrible Master."

"Makes me wonder why you're still going to check up on her," Nick says, placing his glass back onto the table, ice clinking against each other. "I mean, she's screwed up in the head." (Darryl glares at him.)

"But still, I can't just...a part of me really hates her," Zak says resignedly. "But part of me...I can't just gloss over the fact that she took me in when I was a kid, after my mother died. Provided food and shelter and all that jazz. Even though my mother dying is her fault."

"Zak..."

"But you don't have to worry about me," Zak says. "Also, what I really wanted to tell you guys is that Marion told me something really interesting. Something about a black mask."

"Black mask?" Clay asks, leaning forward.

"It could be one of her delusions as an effect of the change of heart, though," Floris says. "But I'm interested. Spit it out, Zak."

Zak takes a breath. "Okay, so...when I was bringing food to her, she told me that there was someone else besides the five of us in the Metaverse. Someone in a black mask."

"Someone besides us? Someone else who knows about the Metaverse?" Clay muses.

"That's what it sounded like," Zak says. "Someone else, someone who wears a black mask, has also infiltrated her Palace. I tried to get some more info out of her, but she just fell asleep right there and then. I'm still waiting for her to wake up, though."

"She's not dead-" Nick starts, but Zak interrupts him.

"No," Zak says, taking a shuddering breath. "Is it normal, though? For her to...for her to just...shut off like that? We didn't do anything wrong, right?"

"Not that I'm aware," Clay says. "The last time with our teacher, we let his Shadow live, and the Shadow went back to its real body. Everything turned out fine. Kronos confessed right there in the school assembly, and he didn't suffer a mental shutdown."

"Speaking of the mental shutdowns, there's been more and more cases of those lately," Nick says, downing what's left of his iced water. "You guys heard of the train accident?"

"Yeah. They said the driver suffered that, that mental breakdown thing," Zak says. "What's up with

those, anyway?"

"You know what I think?" Floris says loudly. "I think that mental shutdowns are caused when you kill someone's Shadow. Like, really kill them, instead of beating them up and sending them back to the real person."

"What if, and this is a big 'What if'," Darryl says, swatting at Zak's hand when the latter reaches for another fry. "This black mask guy is behind the mental shutdowns? He knows about the Metaverse, so he should know about Shadows and Palace Rulers too."

"That's a plausible theory," Clay says, leaning back against the cushy seat. "But we don't know for sure that this black mask guy actually exists. It could be just one of Marion's delusions, like what Floris said earlier."

"Even so, it lines up too well to be fake," Darryl says.

The conversation halts there, the entire table falling silent, only getting up and leaving the diner when the waitress comes over to clear their table. As usual, Clay pays for Zak, and they head out into the cool streets of Valentine Hills, headed for the train station.

"I'll keep an eye on Marion for now," Zak says. "I'm excused from the school because of Master's exhibition, so I'll keep you guys updated."

"Thanks, Zak," Nick says, tipping an invisible hat.

"Looking forward to the good news," Clay says.

They say their goodbyes at the platform, each heading different directions. The train ride home is silent, with Clay in deep thought about the recent development. As skeptical he is about the existence of this black mask character, Darryl makes a good point. The dots are lining up too nicely to dismiss it so casually.

It looks like they will have to bide their time and see what comes out of it. Hopefully, Marion's change of heart will help shed some light on things.

*

[5/31 - SUNDAY - DAYTIME](#)

"Welcome-oh..."

Clay looks up from where he's ringing up a customer's purchase. At this time of the day, there aren't many customers, save for this one lone elderly woman buying a tube of mint-flavoured Mentos sweets. He follows Nick's gaze, only to find the same lavishly-dressed man that had visited them the other day, the one he identifies as Nick's father.

"Nicholas," the man says, approaching Nick. Nick shrinks away, eyes on the cash register. "I got you something."

"What...what is it?"

"Oh, don't be like that," Mr Armstrong says. He places something, cuboidal and beautifully-wrapped, on the counter. "You can open it at home. I'm sure it's something you'll love."

Judging from the size of it, Clay figures it's something expensive. Nick takes the box into his hands

and weighs it in his hands. He pushes it back to Mr Armstrong. "Sorry, I can't receive gifts when I'm on duty."

"I can wait."

It doesn't seem like he has a business appointment this time. Clay keeps an eye on Nick, who seems more uncomfortable now that his father is here, strolling through the aisles, browsing every single bar of chocolate they have on sale. It's uncommon to see someone in such fancy clothing loitering about in a convenience store, and Mr Armstrong does attract curious gazes, but they seem to have a bigger effect on Nick than on the man himself.

As promised, Mr Armstrong does wait till Nick's shift is over, which was about an hour after he came to see him. Nick heads to the break room, Clay right behind him.

"I can cover for you," Clay says. "If you really don't wanna see him." Nick shakes his head, his street clothes in his hands as he heads to the changing room.

"Thanks," Nick says, "but I don't think I should be dragging you into this. I'll just...meet him out front. And it's not like he's gonna do anything bad to me. I'm just not used to seeing him, that's all."

"I can stand nearby."

Nick gives him a tired smile. "Yeah, on second thought, that'll be great."

Nick heads out first, with Clay following a fair distance from him, standing just out of view, but able to listen in on the entire conversation.

["Why](#) did you wait?" Nick asks.

"Because I care about you, son."

"If you cared about me or mom. *Really* cared, you wouldn't have left all those years ago."

"It...It was a horrible mistake on my part, and I fully regret it." Mr Armstrong sighs. "I understand if you and your mother don't want me in your life anymore..."

"You think that, and you're still coming to see me at work? What kind of a hypocrite are you?"

"Nicholas, I'm just..."

"Look, can you just..." Nick exhales forcefully. There is a pause as Nick searches for words. "Also, I...this is the newest Switch console, isn't it?"

"Yes, it was something Neil would have liked as well."

"I would really appreciate if you stopped that."

"Stopped what?"

"Bringing up Neil," Nick snaps. "Every time I talk with you. You or mom, you somehow manage to bring up Neil. Again and again. Why can't you...why can't you guys move on? I'm. Not. *Neil*!"

His outburst draws attention from the people on the streets, who turn around to stare at the father-son pair. Clay peeks out at them from his periphery. Mr Armstrong seems calmer than he expected, even with all the stares.

"I see," Mr Armstrong says. "In that case...take this as a gift from me to you, then, Nicholas. I'm sure you would enjoy it."

People begin walking again, someone shouts something vulgar. Nick mutters something unintelligible. When Clay peeks over at them again, his heart skips a beat when he realizes that Mr Armstrong is staring right at him. He winks, then turns, and walks away, hands empty, into the crowd.

Nick returns to where Clay is standing, right outside the back entrance to the store, the box in his hands.

"You know, he's right. Neil was pining for one," Nick says, holding the box in his hands. "Our parents wouldn't get him one, though. Said he needed to focus on his studies and all that. As for me, I didn't really care for it all too much, but now..." He tucks the box under an arm. "Shall we go?"

Clay nods. They begin chatting about something or other, and Clay feels himself becoming just a little closer to Nick.

*

Chapter End Notes

Faith arcana rank 0 -> 1

Charm +3 (working at convenience store)

Chariot arcana rank 5 -> 6

An Unbeatable Foe

Chapter Summary

The Phantom Thieves meet an unbeatable enemy

Chapter Notes

First of all, thank you everyone who read and followed this story this far, who gave kudos and commented love u all <33 Honestly, your comments are giving me the motivation to continue this :)) Given that I've taken 1 month to write 2 in-game months, and there's like june -> feb/march ahead of us so definitely will take around 4-5 irl months

also, the social studies field trip is coming up (6/10) if anyone is interested

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

5/31 - SUNDAY - EVENING

"So, you're an author?"

They finished early today, since there isn't much homework given this week and their examinations are just over. Wilbur looks over from where he's packing his things, shoving his book into his bag.

"How did you guess?" Wilbur says, taking out his water bottle to make space for his book.

"Mrs Armstrong told me."

"Oh. I thought I gave off strong writer energy," Wilbur says.

"Did you write anything?"

"Oh," Wilbur laughs. "Write something, I did. As for whether I published it is another matter altogether."

"Is it a work in progress?"

"Eh, something like that," Wilbur looks thoughtful for a moment. "Hey, can I ask you a favour?"

"Sure," Clay says, as if he doesn't have *that* many people he's struck deals with recently. He wonders what Wilbur wants from him.

"Actually, you're not as dumb as you think you are," Wilbur says. "Your ideals just do not fit in with school standards. That's why you're getting low grades, but you're really an inquisitive chap."

Clay scoffs. "So, what's this favour of yours?"

"Getting straight to the point. I like that." Wilbur nods. "The thing is, the novella I'm currently working on...I seem to have hit a writer's block. My story is at a standstill, and I would like your thoughts on it."

"My thoughts, hmm?"

"Yes," Wilbur says. "Of course, if you aren't willing to do it..."

"No, it's fine." Clay is genuinely interested. He had dreamed of becoming an author himself one day, though that idea was always shot down by his parents. The arts as a career never had a place in his household.

"Great," Wilbur says. He unlocks his phone, opens an app, and hands it to Clay. The title itself is questionable. The War of L'manburg? "It's about how a nation fights for independence against the dictatorship of the governing body. The struggles, the accomplishments, that this tiny nation achieves along the way in its long journey to victory."

There are barely a few pages written, but Clay can get the gist of it. "So, the people who founded L'manburg lived in a hot dog van?"

"The hot dog van, you mean. The spelling is important," Wilbur says. "Yes. They were gypsies, travelling the world, never settling down anywhere. That is, until they decided to found L'manburg."

"And they sold and brewed...potions?"

"Something like drug dealers."

"You...uh..." Clay looks at it, then back at Wilbur, and back at the phone screen. "I think the technique is good, but, uh...the story is a little...it requires a suspension of disbelief."

"Oh, does it now?" Wilbur looks apprehensive. "I see. I'll take your ideas into consideration."

Clay hands Wilbur back the phone. Wilbur picks his bag up and Clay sees him out. If he's being honest, he can't wait to see what Wilbur's story entails.

*

[6/1 - MONDAY - LUNCHTIME](#)

"Ah, Clay." Yao Yi walks over to him. "You resolved that request I told you about, didn't you?"

"Uh...request?" Oh, right, the one about bullying. "Oh, yeah, that."

"The victim posted a thank you message on the forum," Yao Yi says, shoving her phone in his face. "See! Doesn't it feel great when people express their thanks?"

"I...I suppose."

"Right? So the thing is there's like this...request about this gamer who's been cheating at video games," Yao Yi says. "At the arcade. You know Gun About?"

"Gun About?"

"This shooting game," Yao Yi says. "It's quite popular, but I don't know much about it either. The anon's asking us to change his heart."

Clay scratches his chin. A cheating gamer, huh? Since they're quite free now, perhaps they'll look into it after school. If the others are keen. "What's his name?"

"Paul...Paul Craft. I think."

"Tell her to post a warning on the website," Floris says.

"Warning?"

"Yeah. It acts as a calling card for small-time criminals. Their desires aren't *that* distorted, so we don't need much dramatic flair."

"Uh? Are you talking to your fox?"

"Yes," Clay says quickly. A little too quickly. Enough to raise suspicion. "Yes, I am. I do that sometimes." He coughs. "Can you post a warning on the forum?" He doesn't feel too comfortable calling it the "Phan-Site" yet. "We'll check it out if when you do."

"Don't worry, I'll take care of that." Yao Yi holds out a thumbs-up. "I'll keep you posted on more targets soon. Most of it's just spam, anyway..." She trails off, contemplative. "I guess I'll see you around!"

When she leaves, Floris speaks, "A cheating gamer, huh? Sounds a bit under our radar."

Darryl turns around in his seat. "But I think we should check it out, though. This guy has problems with integrity."

"I'm fine with that too," Floris says. "We can use the time in Mementos to train. And get more money."

Clay texts the Phantom Thieves' group chat, and responses chime in immediately. Zak is free, as expected, and Nick is as well. This afternoon, they will head into Mementos.

*

6/1 - MONDAY - AFTERNOON

"You there! Are you sleeping?"

Clay jolts awake. Yes, he is indeed daydreaming, staring out the window at the blue birds soaring freely through the sky. And no, he was totally *not* paying attention to class.

"No sir."

"Lies," Floris mutters.

"Then I'm sure you can answer this question," his new math teacher (who replaced Krones), Mr Calvin, taps his chalk against the board. "We all know that the golden ratio is 1:1.168, but do you know what the silver ratio is?"

What the hell is a silver ratio?

Darryl pushes his chair against Clay's desk, pretending to reach for his bottle, a slip of paper passed beneath the table to Clay. 1:1.414. "Uh, it's 1:1.414."

Mr Calvin harrumphs and turns back to the board, continuing to drone on. Clay lets out a breath he

didn't know he was holding. Well, at least he gained a little bit of knowledge from that. Maybe he should buy Darryl a crepe or something later...

*

6/1 - MONDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"So, that's the cheating gamer."

The Shadow in question is a man about Dream's height, ooze trickling from his skin, dripping to the ground. He has his head held high, arms folded. He seems to notice their presence. "What do you want? Are you...the Phantom Thieves?"

"So you know who we are," Fundy says.

"Yeah, I do. You guys sent that calling card thing to Isabelle Marion, right? What? You're gonna change her heart or something?"

"This isn't about her right now," Dream says.

"Figured," Shadow Paul says. "You're trying to change the heart of some lowlife like me?"

"You cheat at video games."

"Yeah, yeah, and who gets hurt? Those losers who aren't smart enough to cheat to get to the top," Shadow Paul says. "You guys' talk about changing hearts is all baloney!"

"Get ready," Fundy says, and on cue, the Thieves draw their weapons, blades singing as they are drawn from sheaths. Shadow Paul bursts into a mass of sludge, rising as a bipedal leopard, dressed in a green cape and loincloth, a sword in both hands. He's totally relaxed, tail swinging from side to side.

"No matter what you do, you can't hit me!" Shadow Paul cackles. "This is the power of my cheats!" He rushes them, both swords raised. Dream raises his dagger, just in time to block both blows, throwing Shadow Paul off him. Shadow Paul lands deftly on his feet. Bad slings a fireball at Shadow Paul, only for it to pass straight through Shadow Paul as if he is incorporeal, a ghost.

"What?" Bad starts, staring where the fireball crashed into the wall behind Shadow Paul.

"Look out!"

Skeppy's blade meets metal, blocking one of Shadow Paul's blade. The second blade comes down hard, slicing through bone, cutting straight down through Skeppy's shoulder like a hot knife through butter. Blood bursts from the wound, splattering onto the ground. Skeppy's scream is terrifying, painful to the ears, as he falls backwards, sword clanging onto the ground, into Bad's arms.

"Skeppy!" Green light flows from Bad's fingers, into Skeppy's wound. Skeppy winces as his blood begins to sizzle, breaths coming out ragged and short, limbs limp.

"You fucking piece of shit!" Sapnap comes up from behind Shadow Paul, electricity crackling from Kidd's cannon. A cannonball loaded with sparks blazes through Shadow Paul, once more passing right through him and smashing to the ground at Fundy's feet, spraying up debris everywhere. Dream throws an arm up to shield his eyes, squinting through the cloud of dust.

"See! You can't hit me! No matter how hard you try, I'll always come out on top! Now die!"
Shadow Paul's blades glow a bright golden.

Fundy jumps into the air, transforming into the Fundybus. "Get in! We're going to have to retreat!"

There is no time to argue. "Everyone! Move!"

His orders are followed with no question. Skeppy, still with the shoulder wound half-mended, leans on Bad's shoulder, other arm weakly gripping his sword in its sheath. Sapnap helps Skeppy on, with Dream already behind the wheel. Bad jumps into the Fundybus right before Shadow Paul strikes them with his sword. The Fundybus jerks forth, almost losing a door in the process and Bad slams it shut.

"Run, little birds! Run like the cowards you are!"

"That asshole..." Sapnap's fingers are tight on the shoulder of the front seat. The Fundybus hurtles through the swirling void, and they end up back in the main area of Mementos once again, amongst the roaming, weaker Shadows that leave them be. Dream drives Fundy over to the platform, where they are able to head up to the previous platform, to the rest area where the Shadows are non-existent.

"Whew." Fundy says, settling down on a hard plastic chair overlooking the rails. "That sucked."

"Tell me about it," Dream says, plopping down beside him. "Skeppy, you alright? That looked pretty bad."

"Felt pretty bad too," Skeppy says, doubling over and hissing in pain as Bad presses his palm against the skin to repair it, erasing all traces of the wound. "Like I was being sliced in half."

"You idiot," Bad scolds, moving his palm against Skeppy's shoulder blade. "You could have died."

"Dude, a little more gratitude here. I saved your life."

Bad falls silent, focusing on channeling healing magic into Skeppy's body. Skeppy frowns, eyes trained on Bad's hand against his shoulder. Dream picks himself up and quietly walks over to the platform where Sapnap is standing, looking past the immediate set of rails, to a train in the distance, emitting red light from its windows. Fundy pads alongside Dream.

"How's Skeppy?"

"Bad's with him," Dream says. "He's fine. What's that, by the way? A subway train?"

"Looks like it," Sapnap says. "People are getting on it, though. There are people down here besides us?"

Dream opens his mouth to reply, only to take in a sudden gulp of debris and dirt as a whoosh of wind is whipped up around them. He coughs, spluttering and spitting soil out of his mouth. What appears to be a rush of screams and shrieks passes him by. Fundy brushes dust from his fur.

"Well, they're not really people. Just the Shadows of people."

"I see," Dream says.

"I don't see anything." Sapnap sighs, hands on his hips.

"Meh, it doesn't matter. Just know that they are Shadows that won't attack us," Fundy says. "I

wonder where they're going though."

"Maybe to it's depths," Clay says.

"We'll reach it eventually."

"Yeah, about that," Sapnap says, stretching. "Just how far in are we?"

At this, Fundy droops. "I have no idea. We just have to keep going."

"Some help you are."

Fundy bristles. "Better than you, who only knows how to whack stuff like a barbarian."

Dream tunes out the subsequent shouting match. They're at a rest area, so they shouldn't attract any Shadows. Besides, Skeppy and Bad should be done by now. They should leave before it gets dark.

*

6/1 - MONDAY - EVENING

"So, we gotta find a way to deal with that guy."

Zak and Darryl are on a Skype call with them - Clay, Nick and Floris. Zak's face is large on the screen, with Darryl sitting beside him, shifting uncomfortably. Clay is lying on his belly on his bed, laptop placed on his pillow, with Floris on his head. Nick has joined the call on his own desktop, legs kicked up on the desk.

"Yeah," Zak says. "Man, my shoulder's still sore."

Darryl's lips tighten.

Zak doesn't seem to have noticed, and moves even nearer the screen, until they can only see one of his eyes. "I've never actually been on a video call before. This is so cool."

"Back to the topic," Floris says, clearing his throat. "We gotta find a way to deal with that guy. He keeps dodging all our attacks!"

"He said something about using his cheats, right?" Nick asks.

"If the Metaverse is a place of cognition, then that's probably why he's invincible," Clay says. "He knows that with his cheats, he would not be able to take damage in that video game, so in the Metaverse as well, he's not going to take any damage at all."

"Does that mean we have to disable his cheats in real life?" Zak asks.

"Well, something like that," Floris says. "So, does anyone know how to hack?"

The only person that comes to mind is Smith, but Clay does not want to involve him in their Phantom Thieves activities as much as possible. None of the others know their way around computers; Nick probably doesn't know enough to hack an arcade machine anyway. Floris droops at the silence. "So no one can do it?"

"Do we have other ideas?" Clay cuts in.

Silence once again. Zak averts his gaze. Darryl fidgets with the hem of his hoodie. That's a no.

"We'll investigate and see what we can find," Floris says. "In one weeks' time, we'll see what we can dig up, okay?"

[After](#) a chorus of agreements, the group logs off. Clay closes his laptop and places it on the shelf, fingers brushing the new library book he borrowed. Should he read it? Yeah, probably, since he has nothing to do now. Nick is setting up his Switch now, pressing buttons and moving the joystick every which way. Clay has no idea what he's doing, and from the looks of it, Nick doesn't either with his furrowed brows and questioning eyes.

Floris is fast asleep when he's decided to put the book down. Clay takes care not to wake him as he lays down, throwing the blanket over himself and sinks into slumber.

Chapter End Notes

Tower arcana rank 1 -> 2 (Wilbur)

Knowledge + 3 (tuition)

Knowledge +2 (BBH helped him answer question)

Dream's current social stats:

Guts -> Bold

Knowledge -> Learned

Charm -> Head-turning

Proficiency -> Decent

Kindness -> Considerate

TommyInnit, Arcade Extraordinaire

Chapter Summary

tommyinnit, the unbeatable king at gun about
(and mimecraft)

Chapter Notes

fundy and dream date i

i cannot

Spoiler alert for that vid in the end notes

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

6/2 - TUESDAY - EARLY MORNING

"Hey, did you hear about that kid at the arcade?"

"Yeah, supposedly he's the best at Gun About."

"Really? The best? Is that what he calls himself?"

Clay walks into class and sits down at his seat, stuffing his bag under the table and unzipping it, allowing Floris to peek out for some fresh air.

"You heard that? The kid who's good at Gun About?"

"Yeah," Clay says. He should talk to the kid after school if he gets a chance, before he heads for his job at the convenience store. The arcade they mentioned probably refers to the one at Valentine Hills, that big building about five floors high with all manner of arcade games ranging from claw machines to rhythm games to first person shooters and racing simulators. If this guy is popular, then it's likely that's where he'd be at.

Darryl walks into the class, waves to Clay, and slumps onto the table, like a boneless blob of goo. Clay totally understands that feeling. The lesson isn't due to start for another half an hour, so Clay whips out that book he did not finish last night and thumbs through it, managing to wrap it up the second before the teacher steps into the room.

*

6/2 - TUESDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

When Clay arrives at the arcade an hour before his shift is due to start, he finds a crowd gathered around a kid with two model guns in his hands, shooting at what appear to be zombies and

skeletons on screen, all while dodging their grabs and arrows. When the round is over, the boy stuffs the gun controllers back into their holsters. The crowd begins to chatter and disperse.

"That's TommyInnit."

"Yeah, I heard he's even beaten Paul."

"Oh!" Floris cries, climbing onto Dream's shoulder. "He beat our cheating gamer. Let's go talk to him!"

"Uh," Clay starts. "That guy is scary. He's the guy who works at that shady weapon shop."

"He's just a kid you big wuss."

"Don't call me a wuss."

"What're you staring at?" Clay jolts when he sees a flash of blond hair and hears a light, boyish voice in front of him. The kid is glaring at him, looking very much like a bird fluffing up its feathers to seem more intimidating. Clay half-expects Tommy to bring out a legitimate pistol and shoot him through the forehead. Clay, the fearless leader Dream of the Phantom Thieves, shot dead by middle-schooler.

"Uh...I just...Can you teach me how to play?" Clay blurts out.

There. He's said it, crushing his pride while he's at it. Asking a kid how to play an arcade game. Tommy sizes him up. Clay waits in anticipation, hoping that Tommy can't hear how fast his heart is beating or see how tense he is.

"You can just go play by yourself," Tommy says. "It's not that hard."

"But you're good at it."

"Yeah, but I don't teach noobs."

Ouch. Another blow to his pride.

"Although, I'll strike a deal with you," Tommy says. "You know how I'm working at Untouchable?"

"Yeah?" So Tommy recognizes him after all.

"Well, we have a problem, 'cause we're quite short-staffed at the moment," Tommy says. "How 'bout this, huh? I've got some business to take care of sometimes during my shifts, so if you can cover my shifts for Phil, I'll teach you how to play, deal?"

Tommy must have sensed Clay's apprehension, because the boy gives him a deadpan look. "Look, green man" - Clay pretends not to be offended - "are you really in a position to be negotiating with me? I don't lose out, y'know, but you seem desperate."

Clay sighs. Boy, Tommy's got him good. "Fine. When are your shifts?"

Tommy's eyes widen a fraction. "I didn't expect you to agree, green man. My shifts changed, so I do Tuesday evening and Sunday afternoon now. So, uh, let's play a round now so I can see how good you are."

The deal is sealed.

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast acquired a new vow. It shall become the wings of rebellion that breaketh thy chains of captivity. With the birth of the Death Persona, I have obtained the winds of blessing that shall lead to freedom and new power...

The only gunfights Clay has ever been in are those in the Metaverse. Playing on a simulator is not dissimilar, but even so, it takes some getting used to. For instance, Clay doesn't have a six-bullet limit before he can't use his gun anymore. Not to mention that his reflexes are much slower than Tommy's (which is somewhat concerning).

By the end of it, Tommy has him beat by nearly twice his points. By now, Clay's pride is in pitiful shambles.

"First of all, you suck, green man," Tommy says. "You're moving too slow. For the armoured dudes you have to aim for their armour first, then for those carrying flamethrowers and bows you gotta shoot their hands."

Tommy's lecture is informative, and Clay waits till the end to bring up the cheating gamer, to which Tommy scoffs. "That guy? I know he cheats, but I can beat him no problem. What? You wanna beat him? Man, you're ambitious for a noob."

"Please don't call me that."

"What? Noob? But you are one," Tommy says, grinning. "So, anyways, since I'm such a nice guy, I guess I can show you my trick."

When Tommy shoots, he aims for the zombie and skeletons' legs, causing them to topple over. They now lie helpless on the ground as Tommy blasts their heads off with the gun. So Shadow Paul's legs must be his Achilles' heel, and since he was beaten by Tommy with this technique, they should be able to make use of its effects in Mementos as well.

Tommy's phone rings right as he finishes another game. He reaches into his pocket and picks it up. "Tubbo? What? Now? Okay, fine. Bye." He looks up at Clay. "Well then, green man, I gotta go. See ya!" Without even waiting for a response, Tommy grabs his bag and is out of there. Clay glances over at the scoreboard displayed on the simulator's screen. The top three scores are, evidently, Tommy's. The fourth and fifth ones are all Paul Craft's.

"We know how to beat that Shadow now," Floris says. "Let's head into Mementos on Friday."

Clay agrees. He checks the time on his phone, and, with rising panic in his chest, runs out of the arcade and heads straight for the store.

*

[6/2 - TUESDAY - EVENING](#)

Ruby didn't come to work that day, and Clay wonders if something has happened with her rent. They've managed to change the hearts of both her landlord and his daughter, so there shouldn't be a problem, according to Floris.

Mrs Armstrong is at home, throwing together a simple meal in the kitchen when Clay returns home. Now that he's got a job in the evenings, he should at least let her know.

"A job? Why do you need a job?"

Because you don't give me pocket money. And because I just agreed to work night shifts at a

dubious weapons shop in exchange for him to teach me his arcade skills. "It's a service job. Helps to train my interpersonal skills."

Mrs Armstrong scrutinizes him. "Where is this workplace?"

"At a shop called Untouchable, at Valentine Hills," Clay says confidently. "It's a hobby shop."

Mrs Armstrong sighs. "As long as you don't come back later than nine."

A two-hour extension! Man, Nick is going to be so pissed when he hears of this. Clay does a little victory dance in his head.

"When are the dates?" Mrs Armstrong asks. "That you work?"

"Tuesday evenings. Starting next week."

"I see," Mrs Armstrong says. "That would be fine. Make sure you keep up with your studies. I don't think I need to remind you that the next time you fail a subject, you're being sent straight to juvenile hall."

Clay dips his head, mumbling a thanks, and heads up to the room. Nick is sound asleep - a rare sight - and Clay takes care not to wake him. He takes a shower and ends up studying before dinner. When Mrs Armstrong calls, he rolls a groggy Nick onto the ground, earning him a slap on the calf. The two boys head down for dinner, which seems, for some reason, a little more lively than usual.

*

6/3 - WEDNESDAY - MORNING

"Good morning class," Mr Calvin, Clay's homeroom teacher, says. "Today you guys will have a new classmate joining you. Please introduce yourself, Mr Davidson."

Clay snaps to attention. Davidson? Wasn't that...? Clay recognizes his face instantly, the boy standing at the front of the class, dressed impeccably in that tie and blazer. Not only does he look good in that jersey, he totally kills the uniform too! The Enderlands uniform is hardly what one would consider fashionable. Clay blinks several times.

"I'm George Davidson, but you can just call me George," George says. "I was supposed to report on Monday, but things happened, and uh, here I am."

Mr Calvin nods. "So, George, I think you can take a seat over...there," he says, pointing to Clay. Oh, wait, he's pointing to the seat *behind* Clay. Clay tries to pretend that he is not hyperventilating just a few seconds ago. He remains motionless, his head resting on his palm, watching George as the boy crosses the room, walking down the aisle beside him, and settling down into the seat behind.

Good Lord. The cutest boy in this school is sitting behind him. Less than one metre away.

Immediately, the whispering starts up. Baseless rumours, the lot of them.

"Did you hear? His mother committed suicide."

"Yeah, he's got serious family issues."

Clay tunes it out; he's gotten used to it by now. He chances a glance behind him, but George seems to actually be paying attention to what Mr Calvin is writing on the board. Clay returns to staring

out the window, hyper aware of George's presence behind him.

*

6/3 - WEDNESDAY - LUNCHTIME

"Hey. Stop staring. You're making me uncomfortable."

Clay jolts from his trance, stabbing at his meatball. "I'm not staring."

"Yes you are," Nick says.

Floris is curled up between Darryl and Clay, his head on Darryl's lap, his tail pressed up against Clay's, tickling him. "I can say for certainty that you were."

Clay scowls, chewing on a meatball. "I was thinking."

Nick scoffs. "That's rare."

Before Clay can respond, he catches sight of Darryl glaring at the both of them. Perhaps it's better to let Nick have this win than to risk life and limb for a snarky comeback. Clay clears his throat and he continues eating.

"Hey, the social studies field trip is next week," Nick says. "Have you decided where you're going?"

"We have a social studies field trip?" Clay glances from Nick to Darryl. Floris sighs.

"Yes you do," Floris says.

Clay rounds on him. "How do *you* know that?"

"Mr Calvin announced it during homeroom," Darryl says as a matter-of-factly.

Oh. That class where he was too focused on the fact that George is sitting right behind him to listen to Mr Calvin drone on and on about unimportant matters. Clay hangs his head.

"Anyway, where are you guys going?" Nick asks.

"There's Helen Park, which is some heritage trail thing," Darryl says. "There's the Seaside Park trail, again another heritage trail...oh, there's a TV station."

"TV station? What do you do there?" Clay asks. Nick shrugs.

"Probably learning how they show TV programs and stuff," Darryl says. "There's the National History Museum too..."

"I'm sick of museums," Clay mutters.

"And that's it," Darryl says. "So, uh, what do you guys think?"

"TV station," Clay says, holding up a finger. "Think about it. Maybe we'll see big celebrities there who need their hearts changed. Then we can secure our next target ASAP."

"That makes sense," Floris says. "I'm for it. Anyone has any objections?"

There is unanimous agreement among the group. Nick helps them sign up using the Google Form

on the spot, while Clay wolfs down his pasta with Floris egging him on. The bell is about to ring in a couple of minutes and Clay still has half a plate left. God, this is what he gets for zoning out. Darryl casts a worried gaze over to him, his water bottle in hand in case Clay chokes.

Which he does. He hasn't bought Darryl any crepes from the last time. Now he owes him double.

*

6/3 - WEDNESDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"Ah, Clay!"

Ruby skips him to him, her voice light and lilting. She seems healthier, face less gaunt, movements more lithe. Clay smiles knowingly.

"Good news!" Ruby cries, stopping short of grabbing his hand. "My landlord, he's...he's returned the money he took from us and, um, even offered to help find both myself and Jude better jobs! Oh, and he said he'll waive the rent for a couple of months till we can secure them."

"That's good," Clay says, nodding. "Then at least you guys can live a better life."

"I know!" Ruby says, grinning from ear to ear. "I'm bringing Jude to this Italian restaurant he's been wanting to try for a while later this evening."

"Jude's gonna love it."

"Right!" Ruby practically dances over to the entrance to the store. "I can't wait for work to be over."

"Ah, speaking of which," Clay says, uniform tossed over his shoulder as he heads for the changing room, "you're going to be leaving this store soon, right?"

"Probably," Ruby says. "Hopefully I can find a job that pays a higher salary." There is a twinkle in her eye as she sidles up to him. "You going to miss me?"

Well, this is a far cry from the Ruby he knew. Still, this version of her is brighter, happier, and Clay hopes she can remain this way. "Naturally."

"Aw," Ruby coos. Her eyes dart to the clock on the wall. "I'll go and man the store first. You should get changed."

Clay nods. He heads to the changing room. Once inside, he can't help himself from smiling like an idiot. A rush of warmth fills his chest. He put a smile back onto someone's face, just like that. If they continue on as the Phantom Thieves, the unseen vigilantes, can he save more and more people wallowing in their woes? Can he see more people like Ruby, people who hadn't a choice on how they lived their lives, silent sufferers that can once more see the light of day?

This flood of joy...perhaps he can get used to this.

*

Guts +5 (reading book)

Death arcana rank 0 -> 1

Charm +3 (working at convenience store)

Knowledge +3 (studying)

Charm +3 (working at the convenience store)

Sun arcana rank 7 -> 8

FUNDY PROPOSED IN THE END AHHHHH

Meanwhile this fic: i cant even make that happen bc well fundy is a fox

also fundy has seriously mad programming skills

im like: boolean? string? what that?

Fall of the Con Artist

Chapter Summary

Marion's confession of sins

Chapter Notes

i swear the number of times i almost accidentally typed madarama instead of marion...

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

6/3 - WEDNESDAY - EVENING

Zak: Hey guys just wonderng

Zak: is this change of heart thing

Zak: supposed to happen soon im not seeing anything

Zak: Her exhibit ends in like 3 days but all shes doing is just lying on her bed

Zak: hardly eating and everything

Nick: whoa calm down man

Nick: krones' change of heart the last time took a while too

"Yeah, we just gotta be patient, have faith and wait," Floris says. Clay rolls onto his back, typing what he said into the message box.

Me: Floris said it'll take some time. also, have faith

Zak: easy for u to say. if shes not confessing

Zak: me and darryl are gonna get arrested

Zak: but it wouldnt be too bad if i shared a cell with him

Darryl: Zak shut up

Nick: ;)))

Clay is about to lock his phone when Floris makes a grab for it. "Wait, I wanna see the drama!"

"I'm gonna stir up said drama," Nick says, a gleeful edge to his voice. "I'm gonna be Zak's best wingman. Just you wait, Clay, just you wait."

"But Darryl said he wasn't interested."

"Have you seen the guy when Zak nearly died?" Nick says. Clay doesn't need to look down at Nick to *hear* the smile in his voice. The evil smile of conspiracy. Clay has this sinking feeling that one way or another, he's going to get dragged into this. He resigns himself to his fate, grabbing the library book from the shelf and flipping onto his stomach again, deciding to read.

"Is that all you've got?"

"Yeah. Silence speaks volumes," Nick says.

"I don't think there's such a saying."

Nick ignores him, continuing to type away at his phone. Floris is chuckling to himself, and Clay does *not* want to know exactly what "drama" is being stirred up in the group. What if it affects their synergy? What if Darryl and Zak refuse to work with each other after this?

Clay sighs, massaging his temples. "I'm going to sleep."

"You do that," Floris says. "How do I switch your phone off?"

Clay shows him how. "Can you even type with your tiny fox paws?"

"Yeah," Floris says. "Surprisingly. Anyway, what does 'lurking' mean?"

Clay ignores him and throws the blanket over himself, trying to block out the glaring light of the phone. Staring at blue light before you sleep is bad for your eyes. It doesn't take long for him to surrender himself to slumber, with the mental note ringing out in his head to return that library book tomorrow.

*

6/4 - THURSDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"Oh, you're here today." Niki appears to be harvesting the pineapples from their pots, her gloved hands covered in soil. She stands, placing the final pineapple fruit onto the table.

"Of course I am," Clay says. "The plants need me."

Niki laughs. "I'm glad you said that. You can go harvest those carrots over there."

Ah, the carrots that Clay had planted a while ago. He plucks them out of the dirt, their orange bodies sliding out smoothly. He places them to the side.

"What are you going to do with all these?" Clay asks.

"Usually I give them to the cafeteria vendors," Niki says. "It's not enough to cover a substantial amount of the cost of their ingredients, but at least it's something."

"That's kind of you."

"Thanks." Niki places the pineapples into a woven basket and instructs Clay to do the same for the carrots in another basket. Clay dumps the carrots into the basket and hands them to Niki, who declares that she is going to head down to the cafeteria right that instant. She leaves the room, promising that she would be back soon, and promptly shuts the door with a click. Clay decides to tend to their pots of geraniums growing by the sill in the meantime, their little tiny pink heads poking out from between their fleshy leaves.

Clay freezes when he hears buzzing from behind him. He spins on his heels, letting out a sigh of relief when he finds Niki's phone left on the table, screen flashing, a profile picture with the person's name, Derek, displayed with a heart shape at the end. Ah, right. Clay remembers Derek. He's Niki's boyfriend whom her mother has issues with.

He's not going to pick up. Definitely not. He barely knows Niki, and just continues to tend to the flowers, tuning out the annoying vibrations till they cease completely. He hums a tune to himself, turning around once more when he hears the click of the door and Niki re-entering with empty arms.

"Oh, this is where I left it," Niki says, delighted as she strides over to the counter.

"Derek called," Clay tells her. Upon hearing his name, and looking at her missed call notification, Niki's face falls.

"Oh," she mumbles, pocketing her phone. "It's just Derek."

Just Derek? "What's wrong?"

"Huh?" Niki looks lost in thought, twirling a lock of hair around her finger. She forces a tight smile. "It's nothing. Derek and I had a fight, that's all."

"A fight?"

"It was something trivial," Niki says. "He didn't want me to go out with my friends for movie night. I mean, he's usually not happy about it, but yesterday, he was...angry." She trails off, and Clay is about to respond when she shakes her head. "Like I said, it's nothing much, though. Come on, time's almost up!"

Clay packs his things, leaving Niki to lock up after them. Maybe it's just him, but he cannot quite shake a growing concern for Niki...

*

[6/4 - THURSDAY - EVENING](#)

"I heard your social studies trip is coming up."

Clay looks up from where he's peeling potatoes. He's half-expected to have nicked his finger or something by now. The sharpness of the peeler scares him.

"Yes, it is," Clay says. "Nick and I are going to the TV station."

"Hmm, perhaps you will see Mr Blade there," Mrs Armstrong says as she dices the garlic.

"Mr Blade?"

"An associate that I am working with," Mrs Armstrong says. "Regarding the cases of the mental shutdowns and the Phantom Thieves...well, he's the student detective in charge of that case."

"A student detective?"

"He's currently in high school, not much older than you," Mrs Armstrong says. "He's known as the Detective Prince and is rather popular among his peers. He doesn't speak much, but when he does, his words hold weight."

Oh, this is rather bad, isn't it? There's this detective actually pursuing the Phantom Thieves? And he's popular? Known as the Detective Prince? Also quite smart? He ought to let the team know as soon as possible. They have got to be more careful about what they do from now on.

"Well, enough about him," Mrs Armstrong says. "You seem to be close with Nick."

"Yeah," Clay says. "He's fun to hang around."

"Do you have other friends in school?"

This is starting to sound like an interrogation. Not that Clay can blame her, since she's a prosecutor and all. "Yeah. We've got a few good friends."

"Even Nick? That's good," Mrs Armstrong says, nodding. "That's good. Nick never used to have close friends. He always stayed by his brother's side, and doesn't speak too openly to just anyone."

"Oh, about that," Clay says. He bites his lip, not quite sure whether he should be butting into Nick's family matters. However, his slip of the tongue does not go unnoticed, and under Mrs Armstrong's stern gaze, he has no choice but to ask on Nick's behalf. He gulps. "Nick doesn't like it when you speak about Neil behind him."

At the mention of Neil's name, Mrs Armstrong's face darkens. Her movements with the chopper are faster and less precise. She asks sharply, "What do you know about losing a child?"

Clay swallows thickly. Yup, it was a mistake to ask. "But even so-"

"This is none of your business," Mrs Armstrong says. "I can treat my son however I like."

Clay's stomach drops, tensing up at the unexpected hostility in her tone. Needless to say, the rest of the time in the kitchen is spent in awkward bouts. Neither speak, Clay out of fear and Mrs Armstrong out of frustration or anger. She gives answers in clipped tones, even to Nick, who figures that something is wrong almost immediately. He shoots Clay a questioning glance, but Clay avoids his eyes and instead shovels the gratin into his mouth. He'll tell Nick later. Probably.

He just hopes he didn't heighten the already-high-strung tension between them.

Still, for Mrs Armstrong to show that strong an emotion to Clay...perhaps she trusts him more than he thinks she does.

*

6/5 - FRIDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"Man, even with that special technique that kid taught you, he's still hard to beat," Sappnap says, his legs kicked up on the glove compartment as they continue driving through Mementos. Shadow Paul was significantly weaker once Dream pulled out Tommy's trick, lacking his graceful movements and his invincibility, proving to be nothing more than small fry like the other roaming Shadows around here.

"Okay, so we still have three targets here," Bad says. "Some woman who goes around kidnapping cats...an old man causing trouble at Beatty...and, uh, the dude who bullied the bully from last ti-"

"Are we there yet?" Skeppy says loudly. "This is taking forever."

"Almost," Dream says. He brakes at the next platform, and the group heads down to the next level.

The wind seems to be getting louder, the strange amalgamation of hysteria that unsettles Dream more than any Shadow. Fundy transforms back into his fox form and they begin descending to the next level.

"Hey, you guys heard of the scams recently?" Sapnap asks.

"Scams?" Fundy asks.

"Yeah. Apparently a lot of students are getting into debt or something," Sapnap says. "Like, they're getting scammed, you know. 'Hey, you want a job? I'll give you a job but you owe me money.'"

"That's weird," Dream says. "Why do you owe money to your employer?"

"Well, there's rumour that there's a gang behind it, like one of those underground mafia that you don't wanna mess with," Sapnap says.

"Ooh, scary," Skeppy says. They climb into the Fundybus at the next platform, headed for the void just ahead of them.

"Well, I hope we don't get caught up in it," Dream says. "Sounds like it's more trouble than it's worth." In the space behind the void stands their next target, the bully who bullies, the same black flames crackling at his feet. Dream walks up to him, hand on his the grip of his dagger. Well then, time to get down to business.

*

[6/5 - FRIDAY - EVENING](#)

"Hey," Nick says, scrubbing the dishes while Clay throws the dirty clothes into the washing machine. "Marion's gonna have a press conference tomorrow."

"Press conference?"

"Yeah, and on the last day of her exhibition too," Nick says. "Do you think it could be...?" He trails off, waiting expectantly.

"Most likely," Floris says. He yawns, perched on the dryer as he watches them both. "Did they say what time it is?"

"Uh...lemme check." Nick reaches for his phone and scrolls down. Clay peers over his shoulder. "Six. Six p.m."

"We should have dinner with the rest of the team tomorrow," Floris says. "Then we can watch Marion confess on, like, national TV!"

"Sounds good," Nick says, nodding. He dries the last dish and places it back onto the metal rack. Clay pours in the detergent powder and softener, then starts up the washing machine, watching as it fills with water and begins to churn.

Excitement washes over Clay as he lays in bed that night, preventing sleep from taking him. God, how can Nick snore like that when tomorrow, they will see the fruit of their labour? When they will see the change of heart that *they*, random high school misfits, have induced for the better of society? It is impossible to sleep, not with his heart thumping like that, entire body tensed.

Clay does end up sleeping, however, at four in the morning.

*

6/6 - SATURDAY - DAYTIME

"You look like a zombie," Ruby says.

Clay yawns. "Didn't get much sleep last night."

"Oh? Was it a girl?"

"Definitely not. What kind of guess is that?"

"Who knows?" Ruby shrugs. "Oh, guess what, Jude's managed to find a job at a records shop. He's planning on going back to college one day. He wants to study game development or computer science. Big dreams, huh?"

Clay hums. "What about you?"

"Me? If I have the chance, I probably will," Ruby says, shrugging. "But for now, I'm applying to be a human resource officer and uh, a social worker. Working with people, it's like something I'm born to do, you know, so I wanted to do something along those lines."

"It's good to do something you're passionate about," Clay says. "I wish you all the best in your endeavours."

Ruby's smile falters. "I've got an interview coming up this Tuesday, and if I do get the job, I think I'd be leaving this one, so..." She laughs softly. "Even then, you won't be staying long either, right? Your contract's ending?"

"Yeah, on the twentieth."

"I hope we'll see each other again, even if it's not that regularly anymore," Ruby says. "Hey, mind if we change contact numbers?"

"Sure."

"We can meet up for crepes or something next time," Ruby says, inputting her number into Clay's phone. She hands it back to him right as a group of students walk into the store.

Well, Clay can certainly feel Ruby's sincerity and hope behind those words that he doesn't want to misplace.

*

6/6 - SATURDAY - EVENING

"It appears that Miss Isabelle Marion, the famed Artist from the Countryside who has made a name for herself through her masterpiece the Sylvaria, has called a press conference on the last day of her Back To My Roots exhibition. Now, Miss Marion, may we ask the reason behind this press conference?"

"Oh, here she comes," Floris says. Clay can't say he hasn't been waiting for this moment.

Zak sips on his iced tea, eyes focused on Marion as she walks up to the long table, seating herself in front of the numerous microphones and cameras. She is shaking, face scrunched up as if she is in pain. Then, her lip wobbles, and she begins to bawl.

["I must](#) admit to my crimes, or else my conscious would snap under the weight of my sins," Marion says, bowing her head. "I am no famed Artist from the Countryside. I am nothing more than a copycat who stole the works of my students, who removed them forcibly from my household when they are no longer useful to me. I...am the worst of the worst." Her head hits the table, her sobs fully audible despite the crackling of the microphones and the shocked chatter of the journalists.

"That was...strangely satisfying," Darryl says. The screen becomes messy just then, and Clay can hardly hear the anchorwoman anymore as the journalists are just clambering over each other to ask their questions. Nick swipes away the news app and places his phone back into his pocket.

"Well?" Clay asks, gaze trained on Zak. Zak slurps up the last of his tea and smacks his lips.

"I'm fine. Deep down, I knew Marion was in the wrong. Totally wrong," Zak says. "But I didn't dare to confront her, or even stand up to her, all because I figured I owed her for all the years she spent raising me. And because of that, so many people suffered." He sighs, lowering his head. "But I'm fine now, because she's owned up to what she did, and that's good enough for me."

"I see," Floris says. "You're a real good guy, Zak."

"I'm not gonna go back to that house," Zak says. "Too many memories of her. I think I'm gonna stay at the school dorms."

"The school dorms?"

"Yeah, I got an art scholarship," Zak says, tilting his head. "I was supposed to stay there, but, eh, you know how school dorms are. People are gonna be screaming and yelling at like one a.m. and I'm just gonna die."

"You could continue staying at our place," Darryl says. "My mom loves you."

"I love your mom too."

[Well, Clay](#) saw that slap coming. Zak nurses that painful red palm print blossoming on his cheek with a stupid grin on his face. Darryl harrumphs, munching on his muffin. Nick, on the other hand, has been concentrating on devouring his steak so his entire plate is already clean. Floris, well, Floris has just stolen an entire slab of beef from Clay's plate.

"That's my steak!"

"The steak won't eat itself," Floris says, settling back down on the seat, tail swishing nonchalantly. "Also, we should plan a celebration. Oh, and it can double as an inauguration ceremony for Zak."

"Dunno what 'inauguration' means but I'm totally up for a celebration," Zak says, stuffing the last piece of lettuce into his mouth. "When shall we do it?"

"The next time everyone's free," Clay says. "How about, uh, this coming Monday?"

"Ah, I got something on," Darryl says. "I've got a mock SAT that day."

"Mock SAT? We're not seniors yet. Only seniors do that stuff," Nick says.

"Best to start early. My parents want me to get into Harvard. Or MIT."

"No way. You? Harvard or MIT?" Zak's eyes are wide.

"I think Harvard's a little too high-key for me," Darryl says.

"MIT's pretty high-key too," Clay points out.

Darryl shrugs. "I dunno. I wanna go into engineering...or something. And MIT *is* the Institute of Technology after all."

"You have a plan for the future...wow," Nick says, nodding approvingly. "I'm not even sure I wanna go to college, but my mom definitely wants me to. If I go, though, I'm probably gonna be doing programming."

"I think I'm running into too many programmers," Clay mutters. He has absolutely no interest in programming or coding. That kind of thing is way out of his league. Maybe hacking sounds cool, but he's a little too lazy to pick up the basics.

"Okay, this is totally out of my element," Zak says. "So, uh, it's half-past six. Don't some people need to, like, leave?"

"Oh crap!" Nick leaps up from his seat, hitting his knee painfully against the underside of the table. "Darryl, here's the money." He shoves a ten-dollar bill at Darryl and Clay does the same. He grabs Floris by his nape and throws him into his bag, slinging it over his shoulder. Floris yips and attempts to bite Clay, but Clay and Nick are already sprinting out of the diner, headed for the train station.

*

??/? - ??? - MIDNIGHT

Clay opens his eyes, greeted by the sea-blue walls of the Velvet Room, clad once more in that ragged prisoner's outfit and those chunky chains that clink as they are dragged along the floor. Justine and Caroline flank Igor as per usual, their guillotines placed at one side. Clay grabs the iron bars, staring straight at Igor.

"It seems that you have cleansed the world of one infected with the sin of vanity," Igor says. "Your rehabilitation is coming along well."

Clay knows not to ask this time. There's no point constantly asking a question he will get no answer to.

"It seems that I have done well to place my trust in you, Trickster," Igor says.

It seems Igor is impressed...

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast acquired a new vow. It shall become the wings of rebellion that breaketh thy chains of captivity. With the birth of the Judgement Persona, I have obtained the winds of blessing that shall lead to freedom and new power...

"I shall now grant you the use of your Third Eye," Igor says, "to see what others cannot. Make use of this newfound power in your future endeavours. Now, I believe it is time for you to return to reality."

Clay nods. The familiar sleepiness overcomes him and he slumps against the wall of the Velvet Room, closing his eyes, and dozing off with the choir singing in the background.

Guts +3 (read book)
Kindness +3 (gardening)
Hanged Man arcana rank 1 -> 2
Proficiency +3 (cooking)
Empress arcana rank 1 -> 2
Kindness +2 (doing housework)
Charm +3 (working at convenience store)
Sun arcana rank 8 -> 9

just saying im neither from harvard nor MIT

Of Darts and Billiards

Chapter Summary

Beatty = kichijoji

Chapter Notes

hello im sure people have noticed that there is a glaring plot hole (that i didnt even realize) regarding arcana assignment. Big thank you to Kayoi1234 for pointing it out! I'm just clarifying here that the Phantom Thieves has the Fool arcana, while Igor has the Judgement arcana as per the previous chapter.

Hope u enjoy this chapter too! Just advancing some s links and introduction to the kichijoji of this universe, beatty

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

[??/? - ??? - ???](#)

"So that is how you dealt with Kronos and Marion..." Mrs Armstrong says, leaning back against her chair, then forward intimidatingly, fixing Clay with a scary expression. Her eyes bore into his, as if peering through the very windows to his soul. "This thing about the Metaverse, a talking fox that has apparently been living in our house without my knowledge...do you really expect me to believe all that?"

Clay observes her. The furrow of her brows, the suspicion in her eyes, the downturn of her lips. "Think what you will."

Mrs Armstrong gives him a frustrated groan, then shakes her head. "Still, if I take what you say as the truth, then it all adds up." She flips her file to another page, then pushes it towards Clay. This man's face is familiar. A black man wearing flashy sunglasses, hair styled into dreadlocks. Clay remembers that golden chain he wears around his neck, ending in the shape of a dollar sign. And that terrible choice of a crocodile-skin belt with that deep magenta coat. God, his outfit just said "Flashy" all over.

"James Kris, your next target," Mrs Armstrong says. "He was the leader of the Kris Family, the most powerful mafia group in Fariold, someone mere high school kids like you should not be involved with. Someone even the police cannot catch. Tell me, how did you manage to change his heart?"

*

[6/7 - SUNDAY - DAYTIME](#)

Zak: Hey

Zak: We didn't get to decide on a time for the celebration

Nick: Oh yea

Me: Aren't you on duty?

There is a pause in the group chat. Nice timing too. Clay gets off the train, jostling with the crowd as he tries to pick out the head of brown hair from the blonds. He spies Darryl standing at a corner, tapping away on his phone - probably responding to the group chat. He doesn't notice Clay till Clay walks right up to him. Darryl shoves his phone into his pocket.

"Ah, did you read the messages?" he asks.

"Nah. I just got off the train. What did they say?" Clay asks.

"We're just waiting for your opinion," Darryl says. "So, are you free next Friday?"

"I should be good."

"Okay, we'll tell the team later," Darryl says. "So, there's this place that sells good cake."

"Is it the same cafe?" Clay asks, as they ascend the staircase, heading out into the crisp air, the last vestiges of spring before summer comes round. [Beatty is](#) even more crowded during the weekends. Clay didn't have the time to really have a look at the shops the last time they came here, when he accompanied Darryl for pancakes.

"Hey, hey, we've got a target we're supposed to be looking out for here, right?" Floris calls, climbing up onto Clay's shoulder.

"A target?" Clay asks, doing some window-shopping as he stares at a very nice leather coat displayed on a mannequin in an secondhand clothes' shop.

"Oh, yeah, I checked your messages last night. Yao Yi sent-"

"Floris knows your password?" Darryl asks, impressed.

"He knows everything, that sly fox," Clay mutters, following Darryl past the clothes store. He'll come check out that coat when he's got the time.

"Hello? I'm with him twenty-four-seven," Floris says. "Plus I'm a master Phantom Thief! I've been in the business longer than you have."

"You didn't know a lot of things, though," Darryl notes. "Like-oh, we're here!"

Darryl doesn't get to finish that thought, because when Clay looks up, they're standing at the entrance to what looks like a bar. Open to minors in the daytime, but from seven onward, only adults are allowed. The Creeper's Chamber. Beautiful alliteration. Darryl pushes his way inside, finding a woman standing behind the counter, a shelf of drinks behind him. A boy looking just slightly younger than Clay shows them to a seat, giving them their menus in the process, right next to the Penguin Sniper, where they can watch games of darts and billiards.

"What's that?" Floris asks, paws on the railing separating the two establishments, standing on his hind legs on the chair.

"Billiards and darts," Darryl says. "In darts, you try to throw the dart so that it lands on different squares which give different points, but the catch is that you have to reach a specific point total by

the end of five rounds. Any more than that in a round and that round is basically void. As for billiards..." He glances over at Clay.

"You have to get the coloured balls into the holes at the sides of the table," Clay says, pointing to a billiard table where a game is currently ongoing. "You use a billiards stick, so, like, you have to use that white ball to hit the other balls into the holes. You can't hit the coloured balls directly."

"Wow, you humans have weird games."

"Whatever happened to being human?" Clay smirks.

"I *am* human. Just, uh, trapped in a fox's body with all my memories missing," Floris huffs, settling back down onto the seat. "For that, you have to bring me to play those games. Especially the, uh, darts. Is that what it's called?"

"Yeah," Darryl says. "I'm up for that actually. We can go after lunch. Have you ordered, Clay?"

He ends up eating a meat dish, a large slab of ribs with mashed potatoes and spinach on the side. Floris snaps up most of his ribs though, leaving the bones clean of meat and sauce on the table. With each game of darts played at the station near their table, Floris gets more and more excited, even beginning to yell at the players (who, of course, cannot understand him), but Clay is *not* getting banned from the bar for being unable to control his fox. Left with no choice, he stuffs Floris in the bag, who does not take to kindly to that.

"Hey! Lemme out! I gotta see if they managed to-"

"We'll play our own game when we're done," Clay says, ignoring the curious stares of the other patrons.

Darryl clears his throat. "I'm done. Are you, Clay?"

Clay stares down at Darryl's two plates, both polished, not leaving even a crumb behind. Clay gulps down his final spoonful of mashed potatoes, scoops up his bag, and moves to pay. Floris has stopped wriggling about in his bag, only sticking his head out when they have left the bar.

"I think we're going to have to avoid that place for a while," Clay says, sighing.

"No kidding," Darryl says.

"Sorry."

"It's not your fault," Darryl says, reaching over to scratch Floris behind the ears, which he seems to enjoy a lot. Just one wall over is the Penguin Sniper darts and billiards club. Clay purchases the membership card required to play, and they manage to find a darts station that's free. Clay has never touched a dart before, let alone played a game.

"So, we have three options," Darryl says, staring at the machine and trying to figure it out. "301, 501 or 701."

"Let's do 501," Floris says. "So it's not too difficult, and we don't seem like noobs."

Clay cringes. Nope, he's *not* a noob. It may be his first time playing but goddamn is Clay going to nail it.

"Alright, I've selected two-people play," Darryl says. The dartboard lights up, colours flashing

wildly. Clay clutches the box of darts between his fingers and reaches for one. Okay, just pretend that the dartboard is a Shadow, and the dart is his dagger...

The dart sails through the air, stabbing the board neatly in one of the smaller boxes. The number on-screen, 501, changes to 486.

The trio spend the rest of their time here, leaving at around one when it starts to get a little more crowded, with people streaming in with their friends, their families... Clay doesn't like crowds. Never has, never will. When he steps outside, the first droplet of rain lands on his forehead. Clay blinks, retreating back beneath the awning of the shop as the sky opens up, torrents raining from the sky above.

["This way."](#) Darryl says, striding towards a sheltered narrow pathway passing between two buildings, sidestepping trash on the ground and a few stray cats. He seems to know his way around here. Clay follows him, the pelting of rain against the roof overhead deafening. The shops here are older, but not as seedy as Clay expects. There is an old bookshop as well as a tiny Chinese Feng Shui shop tucked into the corner at the end of an alleyway.

As they walk by the small Italian diner, Clay jolts at the sounds of shouting from within.

"All you lowlifes don't even know the pain I'm feeling!"

"Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"Whaddya mean you don't serve alcohol in the afternoons? If I were ten years younger-"

"Sir, don't make me call the police on you."

"I swear I'll remember this! I'll get my revenge, or my name is not Hendrick Orlon!"

Clay watches as an elderly man storms out of the diner, dressed in a tatty polo tee and torn slacks, reeking of booze. He doesn't see them and saunters off down an alleyway, swaying as he does so.

"That's our target, alright," Floris says. "The drunkard in Beatty who's been causing trouble for people. Frequents the little Italian eatery down Harmony Alley."

"His name is Hendrick Orlon," Darryl says. "We got his full name, so that means we can go to Mementos and punish his Shadow, right?"

"Yeah," Floris says. "We can always go, then come back and celebrate."

"Okay, I'll contact the team," Clay says.

They take the same train back to Valentine Hills, chatting about school, about life in general, and part ways there.

*

[6/7 - SUNDAY - EVENING](#)

"The rain sort of fits the mood, doesn't it?" Wilbur says, waiting for Clay to finish reading the updates to the chapters he wrote in The War of L'manburg. It could be just Clay, but other than the structuring of the earlier chapters and the addition of a couple of minor events, there hasn't been much change to the story, especially not the glaring plot holes that Clay pointed out the last time round. He *has* added one new chapter, about how the founders of L'manburg have begun defending

themselves against the war waged on them, how they've fallen right into the dictator's trap, ending on a cliffhanger as explosives detonates beneath their feet.

"It's just the beginning of the story," Wilbur says. "This is what sparked the First War of L'manburg, which would lead to a peace treaty forged between the dictator and the ambassador of L'manburg." He frowns. "That's only an idea though. I haven't thought about how I'm going to link it to the second war."

"There's a second war?"

"Something like that," Wilbur says. "What do you think? Too much action?"

"Probably," Clay says, handing Wilbur back the phone. "I mean, putting two wars back to back is a little rushed. Maybe you should write a filler scene between them."

"Oh man, filler scenes aren't fun," Wilbur says, adjusting his beanie. "Do you think something political would work?"

"I'm not a big fan of politics, so I may not be able to help as much."

"That's not a problem," Wilbur says. "I'll consider it, these ideas. Thank you so much for your help, Clay. Oh, and the book I recommend reading this time round - I'm sure you can try something longer and a little less dark - is Totto-Chan, an autobiography, about the life of a young Japanese girl who attends a school that accepts her for who she is, as compared to public schools where society stresses conformity. I think it could expand your horizons a little, diving into a genre that you probably have not thought of delving into before."

Clay nods. He should take a look around bookshops or the library. He sees Wilbur out, the man disappearing behind a wall of climbers, headed for the station.

When he returns to his room, Nick is doing homework, and Floris is perched on the topmost stair of the bunk bed, staring at the wall.

["What's](#) wrong?" Clay asks, climbing up the stairs and settling down beside Floris. His fox friend is never usually this quiet. Floris keeps quiet, tilting his head, slowing the swish of his tail. Clay scratches him behind an ear and smirks as Floris edges closer, purring in satisfaction.

"It's nothing. I feel sorta bad, though. You guys have been helping me infiltrate Palaces and stuff, but I've gotten no closer to finding out who I really am."

"Is it what I said from this afternoon?"

Floris doesn't answer.

"You think we're gonna kick you out just 'cause you're sorta dumb?" Clay says, moving to pat his head, withdrawing his hand when he thinks Floris is going to snap his jaws at him. "Besides, we're not just doing it for you, you know."

Floris smiles, or at least, Clay thinks he does. It's a little hard to tell from that little fox face of his. Floris yawns, baring his sharp fangs, and ambles over to Clay's pillow.

"Oh, don't you dare," Clay cries, launching himself at Floris, crashing straight into the bed frame. He screeches in pain, jolting Nick from his studies, leaving Floris laughing and yowling at the corner, slapping his paw against the wall. That's it, Clay isn't being nice to Floris ever again.

6/8 - MONDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

Clay regrets his life decisions. Studying in school was not the best idea of his life (but he did manage to borrow Totto-Chan). The weather was clear when he settled down at one of the studying booths, but the first rumble of thunder sinks Clay's heart like a rock to the bottom of the sea. He tried to study for as long as possible, but once the clock strikes five, he knows he's got to leave, hoping that he'd be able to catch the first train back.

At the entrance to the school, Clay spots a familiar silhouette, speaking on the phone, backpack strap hanging from a shoulder.

"Hey, it's your crush," Floris sniggers. "Oh, and look, he doesn't have an umbrella."

Clay stuffs his hands into his pockets. "So...?"

"He doesn't have an umbrella. You have an umbrella. Be a gentleman."

Clay's heart is in overdrive, palms clammy, blood coursing through his ears. Well, Floris *does* have a point. Alright, it's now or never. He reaches into his bag and pulls out his umbrella, marching over to George, who has just ended his call.

"Hey," Clay says, letting the umbrella hang at his side, trying to act as casually as possible. "You heading home?"

"Yeah. The rain's coming down heavy, isn't it?" George says, shuffling. "Too bad I've got no way home. Not till this lets up."

"I don't know if he's dense," Floris says from within the bag, "or if he's just being kind."

Or he's giving me a chance, Clay thinks hopefully. He holds up his umbrella. "Wanna walk together?"

He can hear Floris squealing from within his bag. George gives Clay the brightest smile, teeth and all. "Sure. Certainly beats waiting out here." Clay opens the umbrella, the blue floral pattern a little embarrassing, but George doesn't seem to mind. It is a little cramped walking together under the same tiny umbrella, but at least it keeps them dry for the most part.

"So, I heard you committed crimes," George says. "The famous delinquent student."

"Not the best first impression," Floris mutters.

"You're pretty famous yourself," Clay says. George laughs, and Clay can barely hide his growing grin.

"Guess we're two of a kind, huh?"

Clay's ears go hot. Is...Is George *flirting* with him? "Seems that way."

They fall into easy conversation, which is much unlike what Clay expected. They talk about everything under the sun, from classmates to clubs and teachers to the ridiculous rumours that they have heard about themselves. It eventually turns into a contest, to see who can come up with the weirdest rumour they've heard. It ends all too soon when they reach the station. George is so easy to talk to, just someone that he can click immediately with. Man, he's going to miss this...

"Hey," George says, as they tap their cards against the reader. "You're pretty fun to talk to. Nothing like what the rumours say." They head onto the escalator that takes them to the platform.

"Neither are you."

"Wanna hang out more?" George asks, already holding out his phone.

Clay's heart soars. Angels sing in his ears. He has transcended the mortal plane. He can already imagine Floris snickering at him from inside the bag, teasing him about this whenever he sees George around but who the fuck cares about Floris and his taunting when *George* is offering his number? Clay has never fished his phone from his pocket so fast in his life.

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast acquired a new vow. It shall become the wings of rebellion that breaketh thy chains of captivity. With the birth of the Magician Persona, I have obtained the winds of blessing that shall lead to freedom and new power...

"Oh, my train's here," George says, handing Clay his phone back. "Are you going the same way?"

Clay shakes his head. A pity.

"Well then, I guess this is goodbye. Text me, alright?" He sprints down the escalator, boarding the train with the other passengers. Clay almost forgets to step off the escalator when he reaches the bottom, too busy staring at George as the train doors close, the train speeding away from the platform.

"You. Suck. Big. Time," Floris says, unzipping the bag from within and poking his head out, shaking his body and getting water all over Clay. "You fucking let me drown in the rain."

"You're still alive."

"You..." Floris groans. "You disgust me. What happened to bros before hoes."

"Oh shut up," Clay says absently, stuffing Floris' head back into the bag. Floris yelps, but Clay pays him no mind.

God, he's in love. Lord help him.

Chapter End Notes

Tower arcana rank 2 -> 3

Knowledge +3 (tuition)

Fortune arcana rank 2 -> 3

Knowledge +5 (studying while raining)

Magician arcana rank 0 -> 1

Actually fell asleep during my lecture today for like 30mins thank god my camera was off

Social Studies Field Trip

Chapter Summary

here it is at last

here we come mr blade

Chapter Notes

technoblade's first appearance at last but im so worried i can't write him well lol
techno's humour is a little hard to emulate

BASICALLY IM SCARED I WONT BE ABLE TO MAKE TECHNOBLADE
FUNNY

also i literally got goosebumps writing the 6/10 pancake scene my heart was literally
racing a mile a minute

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

6/8 - MONDAY - EVENING

"I'm *not* eating that. You know full well I hate it, mom."

Clay flinches when he hears the shattering of ceramic. Floris wriggles about in the bag, clearly interested, but not about to risk capture.

"What do you mean you're not eating it? Neil *loved* it!"

"There it is again. I'm not eating it for a dead boy, mom. You're *always* talking about him! You're always talking about Neil! You don't care about either of us! Neither myself nor dad!"

Okay, this is some conversation that Clay does not exactly want a part of. He chews his bottom lip. Clay is not exactly a confrontational person unless they're in the Metaverse - he's a whole different person there - and besides, this is a family matter. It's up to Nick and his mother to solve it.

"How *dare* you speak about your brother like that?"

He flinches yet again when he hears a slap, the smack of skin against skin. Something topples, something slams into the wall, and a mass of brown shoots past him. The door flies open, and Nick is out of the house, taking nothing with him, leaving a trail of frustration and resentment behind. Mrs Armstrong appears at the doorway. She takes one look at Clay and sighs.

"I apologize for asking," Mrs Armstrong says, holding a hand to her forehead. "Do you mind getting Nick? I don't think he will listen to me right now."

"To force him to eat something he doesn't like?" Clay says, flaring with a sudden anger. "Mrs

Armstrong, Nick is a person too, not the remnant of one."

It surprises Clay when Mrs Armstrong doesn't bother with a comeback. Her exhaustion is evident from the way she seats herself, the tiredness in her eyes. She does not speak, and Clay turns on his heels, headed for the door.

[He does](#) not find Nick very far from the house. Nick is sitting all alone at a bench near a park, nursing a can of Mountain Dew. Clay strides over and snatches it out of his hand. Nick jumps and Clay chugs down the rest of the drink, tossing the empty can into the trash can.

"Hey!"

Nick's eyes are puffy, cheeks blotched red, made ever so obvious by the light of the streetlamp. Clay places his bag down on the ground beside the bench. Floris remains respectfully quiet.

"Dude, Mountain Dew ain't good for you at night."

Nick laughs a watery laugh. "Mountain Dew's got no effect on me."

Clay punches his arm lightly. "You wanna stay out here a tad longer? I can say I couldn't find you."

"Mom sent you?"

"Yeah," Clay says. He puffs his chest out. "But don't worry about that. Just play along with my story and we'll be fine."

Nick chuckles. "Thanks man. Really. It's super nice of you."

"Also, about that," Clay says, scratching his head. "I think you and your mom should talk to each other. You know, just, uh...communicate."

Nick's eyes darken. "I tried. I do try, but she just refuses to listen to me. I think it's impossible unless we have a mediator, so...Clay...I know this is a lot to ask, but...do you mind..." He picks at his cuticles, waiting anxiously for Clay's response, which he gives immediately.

"Yeah, sure," Clay says. It won't be easy, but if Nick needs him there, he'd do it. "But I think you and your mom should just...calm down for today. It's no good trying to talk to each other when you're both fuming mad."

"You're right," Nick says. He stands, and Clay can sense a renewed vigour in his stance. "We should do this soon. Wouldn't wanna remain at odds with my mom forever. Right, I think we should go back-" He is interrupted by a deep rumble, then his face goes red.

"Wanna pick something up from the grocery store before we get back?"

Nick gives him a grateful smile.

*

[6/9 - TUESDAY - AFTER SCHOOL](#)

"Hmm, this is good. Like, really good."

Clay can't really tell over the excessive sweetness of the mousse cake, or perhaps he has a commoner's palate, but it just tastes like a normal mousse cake to him. Darryl is thoroughly

enjoying his mousse cake, because it's gone in seconds.

"Do you want mine?" Clay slides his plate across the table to Darryl, whose eyes are sparkling and gobbling it up immediately.

"Thanks for coming out here with me," Darryl says, dabbing at his mouth with the serviette.

"Means a lot, especially since you're kinda busy and all."

"Yeah, it's fine. I've still got about half an hour before work."

"Oh, is that so?" Darryl says, sipping at his passionfruit juice. "Then let's stay here a little longer."

"How's your exams, by the way?" Clay asks. "Your, uh, mock SAT?"

"That thing? It was tough. And it was weird since I was sitting there with a bunch of seniors," Darryl says. "Oh, and I saw Eret. I think he recognized me or something, because he was, like, staring."

"Does he do that much?"

"What? No," Darryl says, shaking his head. "To be honest, I think he's a little suspicious of us. Wouldn't surprise me if he's got snitches in the school keeping a lookout."

"You guys really hate him that much?"

"Well, we don't *hate* him, per se. It's just...Eret has a way of doing things that makes people unhappy," Darryl says. "He was chosen by the teachers, by the way, to be the president of the Student Council."

"Ah, enough about him. We'll take care of the threat when it comes to it."

Darryl raises a brow. "For some reason, you sound really dangerous." He sips once more at his juice. "Oh, yeah. After the exam, I went to visit Adrian."

Clay hasn't heard that name in a long time. "How's he doing?"

"He's doing alright," Darryl says. "Woke up a while ago, but I've only been free enough to visit him recently." He drops his gaze at this. "He's going into rehab soon, once his leg's healed a little more."

"Then he can walk again," Clay says. "You guys can hang out together."

"About that..." Darryl says, fidgeting with his straw. "Adrian's thinking of switching schools. After the whole Krones' thing, he's gonna...he's gonna get bullied, treated differently, and most importantly, he has trauma associated with the school. I can't disagree, because this is Adrian's health we're talking about, and I really want what's best for him but..." He sighs and takes a deep breath. "Am I a bad friend? For feeling this way?"

"Not at all," Clay says, shaking his head. "Adrian has been your best friend for a long time, right?"

"Yeah," Darryl says. "He's not going to be moving out of the city, so I'd still be able to hang out with him, but not having him around school is just..."

"You'll still have us," Clay says. "You're not as lonely as you'd be, maybe, a couple of months ago."

Darryl pauses, then laughs. "You're right. I think Adrian transferring is for the best, but for now, I'm gonna support him at rehab when I can."

It seems that Darryl has opened up to him a little more...

"Oh, it's almost time for your work. We should leave."

Clay nods. He stands and heaves his bag onto his shoulder. He exits the store with Darryl, then turns round the corner to head to the convenience store.

*

6/9 - TUESDAY - EVENING

"So, you're the new kid working here? Tommy told me he managed to find someone but I didn't think it'd be you."

"O-Oh..." Clay tugs at a loose thread on his bag.

"So, the pay's fifteen an hour. You'll be working from six to eight, so that's thirty dollars," Phil says. "No contract, nothing. I'll pay you every time you leave. You don't have to come in if you're occupied. Look around; we're not *that* busy, so here's a lesson for you: don't believe everything Tommy says."

Well then. Clay hates to admit it, but Tommy did play him like a fiddle this time round.

"Then again, I wonder what that kid's up to," Phil says. "Okay, so you probably know your way around guns a little better, considering you've been shopping from me. So you can get to work polishing those rifles first."

The two hours spent at the shop flies by quickly with so much to do. Although the weapons that Phil sells are merely replicas, they still look and feel real (which gives them that edge in the Metaverse).

"Oh, I almost forgot," Phil says. "You got that package from me, right? The one I told you to bring back?"

"Yeah," Clay says. He's never taken it out of the bag since he's received it. He retrieves it - the paper bag is soaked to the core, so he's exchanged it for a plastic one (from the Triple Seven convenience store) - and hands it to Phil. Phil peers inside, notably impressed, then hands it back to Clay. Clay stares at the pistol, then back at Phil. Phil waves the pistol at him.

"Keep it," Phil says. "It's an old model anyway. I've got a new shipment coming in soon."

"O-Oh," Clay mumbles. This one looks way realer than the one he's currently using, and much heavier to boot. "It's not real, is it?"

"Hell no. I don't stock real guns here," Phil says, picking up his magazine again.

"Uh, Mr..."

"Phil. Tommy calls me 'Big P' so that's another option."

"Mr Phil, the pistol, it...it's a little...different from what I've been seeing."

"That's 'cause it was customized," Phil says. "Bigger bullet chamber, decorative barrel. I do those

sorts of things..." He narrows his eyes. "Alright, spit it out. What do you want from me?"

Customization would be really helpful here, especially if it'd help them in the Metaverse. "Can you customize guns for us?"

"Customize..." Phil scratches his chin. "Well, since you're already working here, why not I just teach you to customize your own guns? When we're not too bustling you can experiment by yourself in the back room. "

"Really?"

"Yeah," Phil says. "In exchange, though, you gotta help me keep an eye on Tommy, oh, and not talk about your job to anyone outside of work."

Sounds simple enough. Clay is going to meet up with Tommy anyways to pick up more gun techniques and skills anyway. It's not like he's going to go around advertising the fact that he works at a model gun-and-weapon hobby shop.

"Deal," Clay says, reaching out for a handshake. Phil grasps his hand firmly.

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast acquired a new vow. It shall become the wings of rebellion that breaketh thy chains of captivity. With the birth of the Hierophant Persona, I have obtained the winds of blessing that shall lead to freedom and new power...

"Right then. Since we're a little short on time here, I'll teach you the next time you swing by, alright?"

Clay nods. Phil shoves thirty dollars at him, waving goodbye as Clay leaves the store.

*

[6/10 - WEDNESDAY - MORNING](#)

"I have never...*ever* felt so bored in my life..."

Nick swings an arm around Clay's shoulders. "Tell me about it."

"I thought we'd get to learn about potential targets..." Floris mumbles. "Is the air-con even switched on? I'm sweltering here."

"Don't get your fox sweat all over my bag."

Floris pauses. "I don't *sweat* like you monkeys."

"You pant like a do-" Nick starts when Darryl turns around and glares at them. Both Clay and Nick shut up immediately. Floris stifles a cackle. Clay proceeds to build sandcastles in the sky. How can one not when what they're learning is...common sense?

"Hey, your George isn't here," Floris whispers.

"He's not *my* George."

"Maybe he went on one of those nature trails. That's pretty sexy of him."

Clay resists the urge to wring Floris' neck as he continues to listen to the lecture. When the woman is done speaking, she splits them up into groups. Nick and Clay got assigned to help with the

camera equipment, which, to be honest, isn't too bad a job if the wires would just...stop...getting tangled up. By the time they're done, their arms are quivering, muscles sore and ultimately, dead tired.

"That sucked. Why am I getting yelled at on a school field trip of all things?" Nick mutters.

Clay shrugs. He and the group, inclusive of Darryl, are hiding out in a deserted corridor. It's almost lunchtime, and since they've ended early, the trio hasn't got much else to do.

"What did *you* do, Darryl?" Floris asks.

"Me? Some modelling or something," Darryl says, scratching his head. "Like, they I was supposed to pretend to film for an advertisement, to get a sense of what actors do, you know. Frankly, I just feel like they're trying to find potential kids they can hire after our graduation."

"Did you get yelled at?" Nick asks.

"Nope. Man, I'm hungry," Darryl says. "Are they serving food downstairs?"

"Dunno," Floris says. "Speaking of food, did you see that pancake place just a road away?"

"Huh? You mean that weird theme park with all the stupid rides?" Nick says, folding his arms.

"Still, sounds like a good idea. Wash away this shitty experience. Plus, Clay looks like the type who's never ridden a rollercoaster."

"Absolutely not. I'm not getting on one and you can't make me," Clay deadpans, then snaps his mouth shut when he hears footsteps behind him. Two sets. At the sound of a deep voice, Clay spins on his heels, coming face to face with Eret, his signature sunglasses hanging by his uniform collar, and another boy he doesn't recognize with brown hair, wearing another school's uniform.

"[Ah, here](#) you are," Eret says. "You guys fans of pancakes?"

"Pancakes?" Darryl tilts his head. "Well, I do like pancakes..."

"I thought I heard something about pancakes here," Eret mumbles, touching his chin. "No matter. Lunch's started. We've prepared food for you guys downstairs. Oh, and there's a change in schedule you should know about, by the way. There's a viewing scheduled for later that is mandatory for you all to attend."

"Viewing?"

"Yes," Eret says. "It's a talk show, but at least they'll show you how they go about with real filming. Mr Blade here will be featured."

Blade has been scrutinizing them from where he stands beside Eret, hands in his pockets. "Blade. Nice to meet you."

If Eret's voice is deep, Blade's is even deeper. Wait a minute...Blade...Clay has heard that name before somewhere...

"Now, if you'd excuse us. We've got a few things to talk about," Eret says. He and Blade head off, continuing to chat about something ever so quietly. They turn the corner at the end of the hallway, and Nick lets out a breath of relief.

"That was scary."

"Why?" Floris asks. "Isn't he just your Student Council president?"

"Exactly."

"Anyway, that Mr Blade with him..." Clay mumbles, holding a finger to his lips. "Nick, your mom's working with him, right?"

"Oh, right," Nick says. "Some high school detective...uh, guy. Detective Prince or something."

"Sure didn't look like a prince," Darryl says, shaking his head.

"Dude, the only prince in your heart right now is Skep-"

"He is *not*-"

"Anyways," Floris yips loudly. "FOOD! I'm starving!"

*

6/10 - WEDNESDAY - AFTERNOON

"May we welcome the stoic and mysterious Detective Prince, Mr Blade onto The Celebs! Mr Blade, please!"

There is a chorus of cheers among the students, notably from female students. Clay and Darryl clap politely. Nick doesn't even bother. Clay is hyper aware of the cameras surrounding them, capturing their every move. Clay hesitates to even scratch his nose. He watches as the man from earlier, the one in the other school uniform, strides onstage, now with a reddish trench coat lined with white fur at the hem thrown over his torso.

"Mr Blade, how do you feel being on The Celebs?" the host asks.

"It's...a great honour. And overwhelming."

The crowd burst into laughter. Clay has no idea what's so funny about that.

"Mr Blade, we have heard that you were pursuing the cases of the mental shutdowns earlier this year in March," the host says. "And recently, you've been pursuing the Phantom Thieves, who have grown in popularity massively ever since they first began operation in April."

"That sounds about right."

Nick tenses up beside him. Clay watches Mr Blade's reaction closely. His face reveals nothing, and his mannerisms doesn't change, nothing suggesting that he's got anything to go on. Moreover, Clay has never even met the guy till today.

"Why did you decide to change cases, Mr Blade?" the host asks.

"Because I'm convinced they're connected," Blade says. "The Phantom Thieves claim to steal 'desires' from their calling cards. Some time after sending the calling cards, the targets who received them experienced what we call a 'change of heart'. So I got to thinking that these cases are *very* similar to the mental shutdown cases."

"So you are certain they exist, Mr Blade? Do you support them, then? They certainly seemed to expose what we would never have found out, like Miss Marion's plagiarism and her unfair treatment of her students," the host says. Did they really broadcast that on the news? Clay should

start keeping up with it. "They can be considered vigilantes, in a sense. If they exist, of course."

"I think they exist, since they have successfully caused two 'changes of heart' already. As for supporting them? Nah," Blade says, eyes scanning the crowd, meeting Clay's eyes for a moment. Or not. Clay isn't sure. Maybe he imagined it. "I think that if they exist, they should be tried in a court of law."

"What the fuck's he saying?" Nick utters under his breath. "We're *helping* people, dammit."

"They're going around changing people's hearts. Who are they to decide who needs a change of heart or who doesn't?" Blade says. "What they're committing is an act of terrorism. We still don't know how they're changing people's hearts. This could be just a form of coercion or manipulation that they could exercise on other, innocent individuals in the future, once they are accepted by the state, or even the country, as righteous vigilantes. We would be none the wiser."

Clay clenches his fist.

"Well now, I can see where you're coming from, Mr Blade, I see where you're coming from, the host says. "Why don't we ask the audience for their opinion? Everyone, please participate in the online poll that you are being sent now."

Clay's phone buzzes. There is a link sent to the class group.

Are the Phantom Thieves just?

"Of course we are," Floris says. "We're helping people who can't stand up for themselves."

There is no question about it. Clay presses "Yes", and submits his answer.

The electronic board between Blade and the host begins to light up. The number jumps from twenty-three to thirty, ending at thirty-five. "Whoa! It seems that thirty percent of the people sitting here are convinced that the Phantom Thieves are just. What do you think about this, Mr Blade?"

"There's...more people than I expected that seem to think that way," Blade says. "I'm interested to hear what people really think about this."

"Alright, we shall ask someone from the audience then," the host says. He glances around, and Clay shrinks into himself, praying hard. It is at that moment that he realizes he's been forsaken by whatever higher power is looking down on them when the host stares straight at him. "How about that young man down there?"

"Don't say anything stupid," Floris mutters.

A woman walks over to him with a microphone which she shoves into his face. Clay can *feel* his schoolmates' eyes on him, drilling holes into his forehead.

"So, young man, what do you think of the Phantom Thieves? Are they just?"

"They're...definitely just," Clay says, pretending that he didn't hesitate right there. "They only target criminals and are unlikely to exert their influence over people who are not black of heart."

The host claps. "I see, I see."

"That's an unexpected opinion, if a little misplaced and naive," Blade says. "Still, I appreciate your

bravery."

"Who does he think he is, acting all high and mighty just 'cause he's called the Detective Prince?" Darryl hisses when Clay settles back down. Now Darryl looks mad.

"Misplaced and naive," Floris repeats.

[Needless](#) to say, they do not really listen to the rest of Blade's talk show. It is during the intermission that they are allowed to leave, and many students pick their bags up and heads out. Clay is just about to do the same when he sees someone blocking his way. Blade, with his hands behind his back, a questioning look on his face.

"Can I help you?" Clay asks. Is he on to them?

"I was just wondering whether I can speak with you more," Blade says. "Your opinions seem different from others, part of the minority who dared voice your views. If you don't mind, I'd like to speak to you more."

Goddammit.

"No, no, this is good," Floris says. "He's part of the police force investigating us. If we can wheedle information out of him, we'd be better able to avoid capture."

Nick and Darryl are awfully silent. Blade holds his hand out tentatively. Clay bites his lip, and grabs Blade's in a firm handshake.

"The name's Clay," Clay says. "I'd be happy to acquiesce."

"Blade, as you already know," Blade says. "Mind if we trade numbers?"

Waltzing with the enemy with knives in their hands, the one being chased and the one chasing. Damn if Clay is going to let the Thieves become the prey. If he has to fraternize with the police to keep his team safe, he's going to do it.

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast acquired a new vow. It shall become the wings of rebellion that breaketh thy chains of captivity. With the birth of the Priestess Persona, I have obtained the winds of blessing that shall lead to freedom and new power...

Clay holds his phone out to Blade, and Blade inputs his number in it. Clay does the same for him.

"When I'm free, I will send you a message," Blade says. Someone calls to him from onstage - he's due to be back soon. Blade returns to the stage, and Clay and the rest of his group leaves.

*

[6/10 - WEDNESDAY - EVENING](#)

"You're treading on really thin ice here," Darryl says. They're making their way out of the theme park gates. "Just make sure to keep yourself safe, alright?"

"Yeah, you're fucking with the enemy here."

"Language," Darryl says automatically. "I don't like it either, but we have to place our trust in Clay, okay?"

"Don't worry," Floris says. "I'll be right here with him."

"I'm not a kid," Clay says, sighing. "Anyway, can we stop talking about him? We're juts going to meet for business disguised as a friendly get-together. Nothing more, nothing less, okay? Also, this theme park sucks. There's nothing but rollercoasters. I think I've only gotten onto *one* ride."

"What did I tell you," Nick says, shoulders relaxing, seemingly relieved to have moved away from that topic. "It's a rollercoaster theme park, in case you couldn't tell. At least you spent some quality time with Floris."

"Not the best conversation partner," Floris sniffs. "He's either insulting or hitting me."

"I do *not*," Clay mutters.

"You shouldn't insult or hit people, Clay," Darryl says, then pauses. "Or foxes."

"I'm a human! Trapped in a fox's body!"

"So, uh, what are we gonna do from here? We didn't find any big targets," Nick says, interrupting that line of conversation. "We went for small-time bastards like Krones, and now famous artist Marion...so..."

"If you ask me, we should go for someone who's considered bad, even by the police and the public's standards," Darryl says. "Maybe someone like-"

"An evil drug-dealing overlord, a CEO who overworks his employees," Clay mumbles. "Hell, even a corrupt politician."

"An evil overlord? Where do you think we are, in a video game?" Nick sighs.

"Still, I like the idea of a CEO or a politician. If we can show that they really *are* terrible people, then we can prove our justice to society," Floris says. "We'd become more widely accepted, and receive the support of the people."

Before they know it, they are already at the train station. Darryl mentions that he's meeting with Zak for dinner and heads in the opposite direction as the rest of them. Nick makes his hatred of Blade known on the train on the way back, and Clay resigns himself to listening to the ranting. They've got to start looking for their new target, and fast.

*

Chapter End Notes

Chariot rank 6 -> 7

Lovers rank 2 -> 3

Charm +3 (working at the convenience store)

Proficiency +3 (working at the gun shop)

Hierophant rank 0 -> 1

Priestess rank 0 -> 1

Fitting in with the Misfits

Chapter Summary

celebratory/introductory party for skeppy

Chapter Notes

the third arc is starting soon im quite hyped for it

u have no idea how many times i saw "fitting in with the mafia" every time i access this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

6/10 - WEDNESDAY - EVENING

"And that's why I'm so mad!"

Clay flinches as Yao Yi slams her fist on the table, rattling their glasses and plates and attracting stares. Lord, she's getting too angry about this. "Look, you guys are the Phantom Thieves, right? And you guys changed Krones' heart right, and Marion's, and you managed to help so many people and now *this guy* who doesn't know anything about you decides that you are *criminals* that need to be *arrested* and-"

"I can't entirely fault what he's saying," Clay says. "I mean, if we think about it, we're just judging who-"

"Anyway, you did great out there," Yao Yi says, clapping Clay on the shoulder. "You did good."

Clay isn't sure what to say anymore, just somewhat touched at how angry Yao Yi is getting on his behalf.

"So, I've got a new target for you," Yao Yi says. "This girl, she's crazy." She hands her phone to Clay, who reads the post. It talks about a girl who stalks her crush and threatens to kill anyone who'd get within five feet of him." Yao Yi pauses. "She didn't actually kill anyone, but I'd like her to stop before she does."

"Sounds serious."

"Yeah, it does, doesn't it," Yao Yi says, taking her phone back. "Her full name's Ivah Christina Miller, and I posted a warning on the forum like you need me to."

"That's great," Clay says. "Thanks."

"I'll work hard as your image manager, so you can't count on me!" Yao Yi cries. "I've got a lot of

new plans lined up for us! Like, you know, I've started getting people to crowdfund us. "The Phantom Thieves need *your* help to change the hearts of hateful villainy. Be on the side of justice!" She pumps a fist into the air. "Sounds good, huh?"

Clay bites the inside of his cheek. Why is she going so far? Isn't it a little much to be asking people to donate to their cause? Besides, they can get enough money from the Metaverse to buy better weapons and medicine anyways.

"We could technically use those funds to treat you guys to a meal," Yao Yi says thoughtfully. "Like, would that be misappropriation of funds?"

"Yes," Clay says quickly. "Cheng, we don't need those funds."

"But this has got to be a very big operation for you, right? I've seen you guys walking in and out of that model gun shop," Yao Yi says. Clay almost spits his water out. Has she been *stalking* them? "Those guns have got to cost a lot, right?"

"Just...just hear me out," Clay says. "What you're doing...it's not right. You gotta return the people their money. ASAP. As for funds, we get them easily during our heists, okay?"

"Really?" Yao Yi looks conflicted, then droops like a wet dog. "I suppose...well, if you say so."

Clay breathes a sigh of relief. Dodged a bullet there. A really large one.

"Oh, I gotta go," Yao Yi says. "I'll continue looking out for targets and I'll let you know when I find them. Bye!" She grabs her handbag and hurries out the diner. Clay downs his cup of water and heads out as well. He glances at the time. Half-past seven. Thank goodness Mrs Armstrong isn't home tonight. Must be working with Mr Blade or whatever.

*

[6/11 - THURSDAY - MORNING](#)

"Is Dennis not here today?" Mr Calvin asks. "No? Alright then."

There is murmuring amongst the students, wondering why so many of their classmates have been disappearing for a few days, and returning the next week. It's a strange trend, but not more than two people have vanished at the same time. Colour, gender, sexuality...it didn't seem to matter. Some suspect that the Kris Family - whoever that is - has been on the move, that some of their minions seem to be recruiting students to do "part-time jobs" for them along the streets at Valentine Hills.

"So Elvira is missing too? You students are being *way* too lax in class."

"Hey, hey," Floris whispers from the bag. "Be careful, okay? Especially since students are disappearing in broad daylight."

Clay hums, turning his head to stare out the window as Mr Calvin continues to call on names. It doesn't take him much to remember that he's nothing but an ordinary student out here, a shadow of his self in the Metaverse.

*

[6/11 - THURSDAY - AFTER SCHOOL](#)

"You look tired," Clay says, removing his gloves. It's almost coming to the end of the session. Niki has been quiet the whole time, hardly speaking a word as they go about their activities, planting seeds, spreading fertilizer, watering crops...

"Yeah, sorry. Maybe I need a rest," Niki says. "Can you help me get my water bottle?"

Clay hands the bottle to her, and she takes a swig from it. Clay studies her. She's been looking rather gaunt lately, her arms a little thinner, her gait a little slower. "Do you mind staying a while longer? I don't wanna go home today."

"Why not?"

"Huh? Oh, it's because...I had an argument with my mom yesterday. Both my parents, actually," Niki says. "They wanted me to cut connections with Derek, and they wouldn't listen to a word I say. Now I don't really want to go back."

Sounds like a familiar situation. Clay shakes his head. "They would be worried."

"Yeah, you're probably right," Niki says, sighing. "Sorry for being so down today. Thanks for understanding."

There is a momentous pause, then Niki pushes herself off the seat. "Alright," she says. "Okay, I've got this." She takes a deep breath. "I got this."

"You do."

Niki flushes. "Thanks. You can leave first, by the way. Bet you're eager to get home. I'll lock up."

Clay watches as Niki shuffles over to her stuff and picks it up. Clay retrieves his bag and leaves, leaving the door open. As he proceeds down the hallway, though, he hears the sound of a frantic male voice. From behind him.

["Niki](#), why didn't you answer my calls?"

He turns around, keeping his ears peeled. This is getting serious. He'll step in if he has to.

"My parents confiscated my phone yesterday..."

"Screw your parents! Why didn't you fight back? Why do you just let your parents trample all over you?"

"Oi, Niki could be in danger," Floris urges. Clay begins to head back to the classroom. However, before he manages to do so, the boy storms out of the room, stomping in the other direction, storming down the stairs.

[Niki](#) appears at the door, looking harried. She notices Clay standing there, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

"O-Oh." Niki casts her gaze down at the floor. "So you heard all that?"

"Most of it. Sorry..."

"No, no, it's fine. It's...I'm glad that you cared enough...oh, never mind!" She shakes her head, holding up her hands, the tip of her ears totally red. "Oh, um, I'm fine now. I'll...see you next Thursday?"

"Yeah, see you," Clay nods. Niki beams, and Clay can't help but feel that she's opening up to him a little more.

*

6/11 - THURSDAY - EVENING

"Tomorrow's our celebratory party and we haven't had anything planned."

Nick and Clay are hiding out in their room, since Mrs Armstrong is at home today, using the dining table to do her work.

"We're probably just going to go out and eat," Nick says. "Like the last time."

"Except we couldn't sell the Sylvaria," Clay points out. "We're flat broke."

"We should just go somewhere cheap, then," Nick says. "I think my mom did mention something about staying at her office tomorrow and Saturday, so we're safe for tomorrow and the day after."

Clay flips the page of his book. Totto-Chan is a totally different genre from what he'd usually read, and it's getting him all sleepy. Clay yawns, placing the book down on the shelf. He's still got a couple more days before he has to return it. His phone buzzes.

Nick: yo what are we doing tmr for celebration?

Zak: hotpot

Me: What's that

Darryl: what that?

Zak: u uncultured swine

Zak: NO NO WAIT DARRYL U R BEAUTIFUL CLAY U ARE THE UNCULTURED SWINE

Nick: lol

Me: oi

Darryl: :<

Nick: Anyway is everyone down with hotpot

Nick: I havent eaten that in forever

Nick: last time i had it i was like

Nick: six

Me: yo guys what is hotpot

Nick: bowl of soup over fire. throw stuff in it

Nick: Like veggies. wait for it to boil and cook

Zak: then u eat it

Darryl: ooh sounds good.

Me: its settled then where are we eating?

Zak: Oakoak cos there's a good place there. we go after mementos run

Darryl: dont nick and clay have a 7pm curfew?

Nick: moms out tmr she wont be back so we can stay out late.

"Alright, it's settled then," Floris says. "Hey, will there be meat there?"

"Yeah, last I remember," Nick says. "I'm gonna be staying up a bit longer. You can sleep first if you want."

Clay glances at the time on his phone. Not even midnight, but honestly, his eyelids are feeling like lead. He kicks his blanket to the corner of the bed. Floris curls up by his head. Clay shuts his eyes and falls asleep in a matter of seconds.

*

6/12 - FRIDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"Wait, stop! Please!"

Skeppy slams his blade into the ground, concrete spraying up into Shadow Paul's face. Having made use of the special gun technique that Tommy had taught him, Dream was able to bring Shadow Paul to his knees, bleeding from both legs, incapable of deft movement.

"I promise I won't do it again!" Shadow Paul pleads pathetically. "Please! I beg you! Spare me!"

"As long as you go back and make amends. And stop cheating," Dream says. Shadow Paul is blubbering nonsense, a mix between begging for mercy and sobbing about his guilty conscience. His Shadow bursts into a spiral of butterflies that fade into nothingness, leaving nothing but sparkles that meld into the Mementos walls.

"That's one down," Dream says, slotting his pistol back into its holster. Skeppy struggles to pull his sword from the concrete, even with Bad's help. Fundy transforms back into the Fundybus. Sapnap and Dream get in first, revving the engine up.

"So, who's next?" Sapnap asks.

Shadow Paul is the second on their list of targets, the first being that old man causing trouble in Beatty. Now they're left with one more request, the one about Miller, who is apparently stalking a boy in her school and raving about wanting to kill whoever approaches him. Not that she has done anything yet, but it's best to stop her before she does.

Bad and Skeppy join them once they've gotten the sword out of the ground. Dream's heart breaks a little when he notices the minute chips in Skeppy's blade. Getting that replaced would cost them a fortune. Once Skeppy shuts the door, Dream steps on the accelerator, the Fundybus hurtling out of the portal and back into the familiar spooky tunnels of Mementos.

The last time they came here, they had reached the end of this section of Mementos, Aiyatsubus, there had been a wall once more covered with those vein-like tendrils that had completely blocked off their descent. Can it have opened by now? They reach the next platform, the last platform

before that wall, and the group heads down the elevator.

Standing there is not just a creepy wall lined with blood-red veins, but rather, the Shadow of a girl, golden eyes gleaming, black flames crackling at her feet. Their final target of the day, Shadow Miller. Dream approaches her cautiously. When she notices their presence, she ceases her mindless murmuring, her lips pulled down in a snarl.

"Are you the ones trying to steal my Daniel away from me? Are you? You are, aren't you?" she speaks so fast, to the point where Dream is unable to keep up with her speedy speech.

"There's no reasoning with this one," Fundy says, drawing his sabre. "We have to beat her up and make her come to her senses!"

Dream whips his dagger out the same moment that Shadow Miller transforms into her monstrous form, a purple-skinned demonic woman who makes a lunge at Dream. She grabs him by the throat, the both of them tumbling to the ground in a heap. Shadow Miller hisses, brandishing her forked tongue and razor fangs at Dream, who is finding it incredibly hard to breathe.

Dream thrashes wildly, stabbing wherever he can in Shadow Miller's general direction. She screams when his dagger plunges into something gooey. She shrieks, releasing her grip on him. Dream clutches at his chest, grateful for the flood of oxygen into his lungs. Fundy is by his side in a second, relieving the dull ache on his neck with wisps of green.

Skeppy and Sapnap keep Shadow Miller busy with their dance of sparks and ice, Skeppy covering Bad with walls of ice, flaring up from the ground whenever Shadow Miller attempts an attack, receding when Sapnap is in the prime position to deal a critical blow. His cudgel connects with Shadow Miller's face, knocking the demon to the ground. Shadow Miller screeches, the fire in her eyes burning ever so bright when she realizes that she is at the barrel's end of a submachine gun, ready to fire at a moment's notice.

"You...you haven't beaten me yet!" Shadow Miller roars, cloaked in an angry orange glow. Shadow Miller roars, pouncing on Bad, who fires at her. Bullets bounce off her skin, ricocheting against the ceiling and the walls of the tunnels. Skeppy is by Bad's side in a second, katana drawn. Shadow Miller, unable to maneuver in midair, screeches as Skeppy skewers her through the chest. He wrenches his blade out of Shadow Miller's body, and Shadow Miller collapses to her knees, a hand pressed against the hole in her chest oozing blood black as the night.

"Why...why won't you let me-"

"What you're doing is absolutely horrible," Dream says. "You can't just stalk someone and expect them to like you."

"But what if someone steals him away from me?"

"You don't own him," Bad says. "If he returns your affections, then that's good, but you can't force him to like you."

Shadow Miller sniffs, staring at the ground. She reverts back to her humanoid form, looking very much like a despondent schoolgirl on her hands and knees, tears wetting her cheeks and dripping to the floor. She glows a faint blue and dissolves into butterflies, disappearing through the ceiling. As soon as that happens, something purplish blinks to life where Shadow Miller stood. A rectangular frame of what appears to be black stone, glowing purple on the inside.

"What's this?" Sapnap mumbles, approaching it.

"Hey, it could be dangerous."

"Inmate!"

Dream glances around at the sudden call of that title (though he's rather ashamed that he responds to it now) and he notices Justine and Caroline standing behind him, Justine with her clipboard and Caroline with her baton.

"That is a special portal," Justine says. "It allows you to return to the entrance of Mementos without any hassle."

"Oh, really?" Dream says, walking over to run his fingers over the stone. It's unexpectedly smooth. Dream nods approvingly. This would save them a lot of hassle.

"These portals will appear in rest areas as well as the end of a path, like this one," Caroline says, kicking it. The portal stands strong and tall.

"We hope it will aid you in your rehabilitation, inmate," Justine says. "We shall leave for the Velvet Room now." With that, the two of them disappear through the portal.

"Hey, why're you zoning out?"

Dream shakes his head. Bad and Fundy are staring at him, the latter's paws folded. "Come on, we haven't got all day!"

"The wall's open, guys!" Skeppy calls from where the wall once stood, now having crumbled to nothing but dust and debris, cleared away by the draft that has just been stirred to life. From the new, foreboding path that lies ahead, Dream can almost hear the remnants of desperate shrieks, the despairing screams echoing from the platforms below. Just what exactly will the new path bring? He glances at his teammates. They appear tired, despite their enthusiasm, from the way Sapnap shuffles to the way Bad takes a sharp breath when he heaves the submachine gun back onto his shoulder.

"Guys, we know that the wall's open," Dream says. "I think we should head back for now. We don't know how long this new path's gonna go for, so I think we can get some rest and come back another time."

"Yeah, I'm *for* that," Skeppy says, yawning. "I wanna eat my hotpot."

"Same here," Nick says. He rests his cudgel on his shoulder. "Hotpot, guys. I'm *famished*."

Dream steps through the portal, the same compressing feeling encompassing him, as if the very fabric of space around him is squeezing his body. When it eases, though, Dream finds himself standing at the entrance to Mementos, just as the twin wardens had promised. One by one, his teammates emerge from behind him, amazement streaming from their mouths.

Are you ready to leave? The Meta-Nav asks Dream.

Yes.

Returning to the real world. Thank you for your service.

The world pulses around them, and Clay finds himself standing at the entrance of Valentine Hills station with the rest of his team, all of them once again wearing their street clothes.

Zak's stomach growls. Loudly.

"Man, Oakoak's like twenty minutes from here," Zak says, glancing at his phone. It's almost half-past five. "Chop chop, let's get a move on! If we get there late we won't get seats!"

*

6/12 - FRIDAY - EVENING

"I'm flat broke. For real this time," Nick says. "But whatever. The meat looks good."

Clay has never seen so many slices of meat in his life. Pork belly, chicken breast, beef shank...There are also vegetables, mushrooms, some kinds of dim sum and even seafood. His wallet is going to suffer for his stomach. They've basically blown every single cent they've earned from their Mementos run today.

"You know, now that I think about it, we're such a band of misfits," Darryl says.

"Whaddya mean?" Zak asks, shoveling food into his mouth. At this rate, he's going to be eating the lion's share of the meal.

"We don't really fit in anywhere, especially not at school," Darryl says. "Nick's got beef with Krones, which is what led to his ostracization..."

"You didn't tell me this," Clay says, spoon in his mouth, turning to look at Nick. Nick shrugs.

"Meh. It wasn't that important. He spread rumours, drove away my friend group," Nick says. "Sorry, I don't really wanna talk about it."

"And since I've been labelled as Krones' boy toy," Darryl says, sighing at the bubbling soup, "everyone's been avoiding me. Except for Adrian, and now Adrian's in the hospital."

"That best friend of yours, right?" Zak asks.

"Yeah. Zak mainly lived with Marion, who seems as strict as they come," Darryl continues. "Floris lost his memories and Clay's the delinquent student that no one wants to be friends with."

"To be honest, I was kinda afraid what sort of gangster would show up when my mom announced that she was gonna take you in," Nick says. He moves a boiled prawn from the soup to his bowl. "Like, she was telling me that this boy was a first-time offender for causing bodily harm to this important dude."

"That's the problem right there," Clay says, raising his voice. "I didn't even touch the guy! He was harassing someone, and I couldn't let that slide. That guy was so drunk he fell on his own, then he called the police on me."

"If he's important, he'd probably have the police under his control," Nick says. "Do you remember what he looked like or who he is? Maybe we can change his heart or something."

Clay chews on a slice of cooked beef. "Sorry. It's fuzzy, my memories and all. Plus, it was dark. Couldn't see a thing."

The only sounds piercing the enveloping silence is the sizzling of the fire as the water continues to boil. Floris yips, crawling onto the table.

"Let's not get down, guys! We'll find the guy eventually, and we'll make him pay for putting Clay

through shit."

Darryl smiles. "I agree with you, but language."

"Yeah," Nick says, punching his palm. "We'll find that dude and punish his Shadow in Mementos."

"Dunno what's going on, but yeah!" Zak cries, pumping a fist into the air, the other holding a piece of chicken to his mouth.

Clay laughs. "Thanks guys." If he had never done what he did, he would never have been sent to live in Fariold, never have been able to meet up with such a lovely group of companions. Even if said group of companions are loud and boisterous, it isn't something he's going to give up for anything in the world.

Chapter End Notes

Moon arcana rank 2 -> 3

Kindness +3 (gardening)

Hanged Man arcana rank 2 -> 3

Fool arcana rank 2 -> 3

also eating hotpot (aka 火锅) for a celebration is pretty common here so usually we would eat it during special occasions like chinese new year or birthdays. i don't really eat hotpot except for chinese new year in which case we always eat with stuff like dumplings, prawn, sea cucumber, fishball, abalone, etc

Slip of the Tongue

Chapter Summary

in which sapnap makes a mistake and eret makes a move

Chapter Notes

eret corners them

also i apologize if i get anything wrong about the guns (i only did web research for this)

think what you will of this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

6/13 - SATURDAY - DAYTIME

"Clay!"

Clay is sitting on the couch in the break room, waiting for Ruby to come out from the changing room. He stands when she approaches, something small and shiny in her hand. She presses it into his palm.

"What's this?" Clay asks, turning it around in his palm. It's a little yellowish, but he notices the black, bold words on its surface. Ruby, with the Triple Seven logo beneath her name.

"My nametag from the time I was working here," Ruby says. "This is my last day on the job. I managed to find a place, a hospital, that has hired me as a trainee social worker. I'm due to start work next week."

"Congratulations!"

"Yeah!" A radiant smile dances on Ruby's lips. "I'm gonna support myself and Jude, and won't bow down to fate ever again. I will carve my own fate, my own future, with my hands. I have to thank you for your help, Mr Phantom Thief."

"Uh...what?" Clay's mouth goes dry. Ruby giggles.

"Come on. My landlord's change of heart was too convenient, and with the Phantom Thieves news blasting on the TV every day and you asking for my landlord's name, I can put two and two together," Ruby says. "Don't worry, I won't tell anyone. Your secret's safe with me."

Clay nods gratefully. "I'll be seeing you around then, Ruby."

"Same here!" Ruby grins. "Wanna grab some crepes on the way back?"

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast turned a vow into a blood oath. Thy bond shall become the wings of rebellion and break the yoke of thy heart. Thou hast awakened to the ultimate secret of the Sun, granting thee infinite power...

"Well then," Ruby says, adjusting that red hairclip - Clay hasn't seen it before - and peering up at him. "What are we waiting for?"

*

6/13 - SATURDAY - EVENING

"Normal body temperature, no rashes, nothing," Joel says, tapping his pen against his clipboard. "Beautiful results. For now, at least. If there are any side effects, we've probably got to wait a few more days."

"I won't die, right?"

Joel barks out a laugh. "Nah."

Clay hands him back the glass, residual drops of medicine lining the insides. It tasted particularly sweet today, much like cough medicine rather than any of Joel's previous attempts.

"Just wondering," Clay says, fidgeting with the side of his seat. "Why're so...devoted to this medicine?"

"Devotion? That's a good question to ask," Joel says. "I'm not sure if I told you before, but this medicine is for an incurable illness. Incurable for now, at least. Someone dear to me is infected by it."

"Someone dear to you?"

"My wife," Joel says. "Currently residing in Rivers Hospital. I'm hoping to come up with the medicine before...before she, you know..."

"I get it."

"Do you?" Joel mumbles. He winces, massaging his temple.

"What's wrong?"

"It's nothing," Joel says, shaking his head. "Just a little tired."

"You should rest," Clay says. "Overworking yourself isn't going to help anyone."

Joel turns back to the monitor, typing in what he wrote down in his clipboard. "Thanks for your concern, but I can handle it. Oh, and if you feel dizziness or anything within a week, you should come back for some checkups. If there's nothing more, you can go now."

Clay stands, picking his bag up and throwing it over his shoulder, utters a goodbye to Joel, and leaves.

*

6/14 - SUNDAY - DAYTIME

"Well now, there we go," Phil says. "It's hard to sell these. I'm glad that you're willing to buy it."

Clay fits the crimson slide barrel to his pistol, marveling at the shine it gives off, pristine even under the lone lightbulb in the back room. A blazing flame decorates the sides, coloured so beautifully that Clay can almost hear the fire roaring. Reminds him of Darryl somewhat.

"It's perfect."

Phil sucks on his lollipop. "That so?"

"Yeah," Clay says. Phil hands him twenty bucks. Clay stares at it.

"This has got to cost more than ten dollars."

Phil waves dismissively. "I'm trying to clear stock anyway. The only people willing to buy stuff like this, as I found out, are kids like Tommy whom I'm not allowed to sell guns to."

Clay smiles and thanks Phil, pocketing the money and stuffing his pistol into his bag. He says goodbye to Phil and moves to leave, only for a burly man to open the door, dressed in a black suit and maroon tie.

"Ah, sorry," Clay dips his head, allowing the man entrance. Without a word, the man barges in, walking straight up to Phil, slamming his palms onto the counter. Clay glances back. Phil's face is hardened, nothing like the fatherly demeanour he put on a couple of seconds ago.

"You had better stop it now, Phil. It's for your own good," the man says. "The case is closed. No amount of investigating is going to shed any light on anything."

"Surely you didn't come all the way here to tell me that," Phil says. "Where's the info I asked you to look up?"

"I got shut down by the higher-ups," the man says, shaking his head. "This case is more trouble than it's worth, Phil. I think we should give it up."

"You know I can't do that," Phil says. "If you can't help, then leave."

"Phil-"

"I said, leave!"

The man whirls around and storms off, pushing past Clay as he does so. Phil sinks back into his seat, sighing.

"So you saw all that, huh?"

Clay shrugs.

"It's nothing you need to concern yourself about," Phil says. "Just...just go, yeah? Be safe on your way home."

Clay nods. He shouldn't invade Phil's privacy if Phil doesn't want him to. Turning his back on the store, he heads out into the humid summer air.

*

[6/14 - SUNDAY - EVENING](#)

"That's all for today," Wilbur says, shutting the book. Clay shoves his worksheets back into his

bag. "Oh, here's the next few chapters, by the way. The manuscript's getting rather long. I may have to break this story down into a few novels."

"Ambitious, aren't you?" Clay says, taking the phone from Wilbur.

"You think?" Wilbur says, scratching his head. "My deadline's coming up, though. My editor wants me to submit a new manuscript soon."

"You published before?"

Wilbur glances out the window. "Before, yes. One book. It sold well for a time, then it went under the radar. Now I've got to come up with something game-changing, something that's unique."

"Unique" is an understatement. Too unique, in fact. The next chapter describes how the two main characters are now holding an election, to vote a leader in by virtue of democracy. Sure, it's somewhat tense, nail-bitingly tense in fact, but in Clay's eyes, the execution is terrible. Too much comedy when the story is supposed to be serious, and the serious parts last so long that it is somewhat draining. The bad guy has no reason to be evil except to just be evil.

"I see," Wilbur says, looking troubled when Clay finishes commenting. "Then I will-" The shrill cry of a phone almost stops Clay's heart. Wilbur glances down at the screen and frowns. He holds up a hand and answers the call.

"Hello? Mr Q?"

Mr Q?

"I'm not done yet."

Inaudible murmuring from the other end.

"I don't care what Ponk says! He can't keep pushing the deadline forward!" Wilbur's scary when he raises his voice. "Q, I've got a student with me. No, it's not Tommy."

What a small world they live in.

"I'll talk to you later. Bye. Bye!" Wilbur clicks the "End Call" button and slips his phone back into his pocket. "Sorry about that. I didn't mean to shout."

"Who was that?"

"My, uh, my friend. Something like that. He introduced me to my editor," Wilbur says. "And now they want to push the deadline forward yet again. It's annoying, but nothing I cannot handle. In any case, I should get going now."

"Just wondering," Clay asks, "what's the name of your book?"

Wilbur scratches his head bashfully. "Hmm, that's...well, if you want to read it, it's called...uh...The Rules of The Earth. It's fiction, so..."

"I see," Clay says, nodding. He's actually heard of that book before, when it came out a year or two ago. It wasn't the top seller at his local bookstore, but it was quite popular. Never did he think he would meet the author right in the flesh, tutoring him in Literature, no less. He remembers the critique, the recommendations by his friends, his family. Okay, maybe it was sort of a bestseller at that time. Perhaps he'd be able to find a copy at a bookstore around Jule Halls, or the school

library.

"Anyway, I've got to go now," Wilbur says. "I'll see you next week."

Clay sees him out, and Wilbur plods down the lonely dark path to the train station.

*

6/15 – MONDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

"Hello there."

Clay looks up. The class is empty aside from himself and another group of girls chatting excitedly at the back. The person who has called him over is none other than their Student Council President, the boy who goes by Eret.

Floris scrambles into Clay's bag, and Clay zips it up quickly.

"Keep your guard up," Floris whispers from within.

Eret strides quickly over to him, and is by his side in a second.

"I've got something to discuss with you," Eret says, voice dropped to a low whisper. "Mind if you step out with me for a bit?"

Clay bites his lip. He has absolutely no idea why Eret has singled him out of all people, a nobody in this cohort of several hundred students. He follows Eret out of the classroom. Already, he can *feel* the eyes of his schoolmates on him as Eret leads him down the hallway towards a room tucked away in a quiet corner beside the faculty office, the sign "Student Council Room" hanging overhead.

"After you," Eret says, holding the door open. Clay ducks into the dusty hideout, devoid of people. Eret shuts the door behind him and gestures to the desks and chairs. "Please, sit wherever you like."

"What do you want?" Clay asks.

Eret smiles. "You know exactly what I want, Mr Phantom Thief."

Clay tenses. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Do you think I am dense enough not to notice that you have a talking fox?" Eret asks. "At first, I was sceptical, but now I'm certain." He leans forward, planting his palm on the wall right beside Clay's face, trapping Clay right where he is.

"Talking fox? Are you delusional?"

"I'm not. I can prove to you that I know exactly what your fox is saying."

"How does that prove anything?" Clay splutters. Eret moves away, heading towards the desk and sits himself down.

"So far, the modus operandi of the Phantom Thieves is largely unknown," Eret says. "They are said to change people's hearts, but no one knows how they do it." He laughs. "No one would ever know because you guys disappear into some insane realm with terrible predators that attack humans on sight!"

“You’re the one who’s insane!” Clay shouts.

“Then explain this!” Eret exclaims, holding out his phone, shoving the screen into Clay’s face.

“Explain to me *exactly* what this is.” Clay’s eyes widen as he stares straight at the crimson symbol of an eye, taking the form of a widget on Eret’s phone screen.

“That’s...” The Meta-Nav. Clay’s mouth dries.

“I don’t know what it does, and I don’t know how it ended up on my phone nor the reason I can’t del-“ Eret starts, only to be interrupted by an incessant buzzing emanating from Clay’s pocket. Eret takes a deep breath, leaning back against his chair, arms folded. “Please.”

Clay sees Nick’s name and answers it.

“Hello-?”

“Yo, where are you? Wanna go down to Mementos today? Do a little Phantom Thieving-“

[Clay](#) hangs up a little too late, his breath caught in his throat. Eret raises his brows, a disappointed expression on his face. Clay exhales loudly, flaring his nostrils.

“That fucking moron...” Floris mumbles, poking his head out from Clay’s bag.

“No cursing, little fox,” Eret says in a clipped tone. “Now, Clay. Mind if you call your friends? I have something I’d like to discuss.”

Clay has absolutely no choice in the matter. Nick’s call came at just the wrong time and the wrong place. Just as he is lamenting his luck, his phone begins to buzz again. It’s Nick. The idiot.

“What the fuck’s-oh, sorry, Darryl-what the eff is wrong with you? Why’d you hang up?”

“You’re with Darryl right now?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, big problem,” Clay says. “We’ve been found out. Come to the Student Council Room-“

“With your other friend. The one not of this school,” Eret says. “I’d like the entirety of the Phantom Thieves to hear me out.”

Clay sighs. “Bring Zak too.”

“What the he-shit, I’m sorry, Darryl! What do you mean Zak too?”

“I mean what I said? Ten minutes, Nick. Pronto. Bye.”

Clay hangs up and turns back to Eret. He proceeds to slump into a seat.

[“Is it fun](#), being the Phantom Thieves?” Eret asks lazily. He’s too relaxed to seem like someone who’s going to report them to the authorities. For what? To pull up his reputation? Sucking up to the teachers?

Clay doesn’t answer. The question hangs between the both of them. Floris nuzzles against Clay’s leg, his swishing tail and perked ears belying his nervousness. The ticking of the clock is deafening as they wait for the rest of the Thieves to arrive. Eret has pulled out his laptop, typing away on some spreadsheet, while Clay is too nervous to do anything else besides scrolling through his

social media sites in a pathetic attempt to calm his racing heart.

At long last, the door swings open, and three individuals saunter in. Nick zeroes in on Eret, who shuts his laptop and waves.

[“What’s *he* doing here?”](#)

“I am the president of the Student Council, in case you haven’t realized. I have the key to this room,” Eret says. “Now, why don’t we all take a seat?”

“What? No, screw you,” Nick says, and Darryl shuts the door behind him. “What did you do, scum?”

“I didn’t do anything,” Eret says. “And I would rather appreciate if you didn’t call me scum.”

“Guys, sit down,” Floris barks out, leaping onto the table. “Eret, he...he just wants to talk, right? You have a job for us to do?”

“Uh,” Zak says, raising his hand. “I’m not very sure exactly what’s going on here. Are we getting arrested or something?”

“I’ll explain later,” Clay says, staring down at the desk, tracing a random scratch with his eyes. “For now, let’s listen to Eret.”

Eret smiles, clasping his fingers in front of him. “I always knew you were the reasonable type, Clay.”

Nick kicks the desk, the metal leg scraping along the tiles. Darryl and Zak cooperate without saying a word. Soon, the Thieves are silent, waiting for Eret’s decree.

“Your pet fox is rather smart,” Eret says. “If I wanted to report you, I would have done so by now. A thorough investigation into your modes of communication would be more than sufficient.”

“Wait, you can hear what Floris says?” Darryl asks.

“Yeah,” Floris says. “Something tells me he’s gone to the Metaverse before.”

“Is that what you call it? That...that fancy castle?” Eret says, shaking his head. “To be very honest, it boggles my mind, the whole concept.”

“Get to the point,” Clay bites out.

“Here’s the thing. I’ve been tasked, as Student Council president, to investigate the recent disappearances of our students, as well as the rising number of suspicious part-time jobs they seem to be taking on.”

Clay exchange glances with Floris.

“Naturally, our students are afraid, thinking that they could be next. There has been rumours floating around that this operation is the work of gangsters,” Eret says. “Gangsters so powerful that once they set their eyes on you, you’re toast.”

“So what you want us to do is to find out who exactly is behind is, right?” Floris asks.

“Precisely,” Eret says.

“We’ve got absolutely no reason to agree to this,” Zak says.

“You have no room to negotiate,” Eret says. “For you see, I have been recording this entire conversation, from the time I invited dearest Clay out for a chat.”

“That’s illegal,” Darryl says.

“That won’t matter once the police gets their hands on the identity of the Phantom Thieves,” Eret says. “I think you’re underestimating the hype surrounding your little vigilante group just a little.”

“Look,” Floris says. “We don’t have a choice. I think it’s best to go along with it for now.”

“Indeed,” Eret says. “I would like this matter resolved by the end of two weeks, that is, by the twenty-ninth of July.”

“Two weeks? That’s tight...” Floris mumbles.

“It’s either this or I’m reporting you to the police,” Eret says. “Two weeks, Phantom Thieves. I give you two weeks. I bid you gentlemen farewell. Please leave so I can lock up.”

Clay stands and makes his way outside, followed by the rest of the Phantom Thieves. They don’t stop walking, in silence, until they are outside of the school, right by the gates.

[“Fuck it all!”](#) Nick punches the wall.

“Language, you muffin head!” Darryl snaps. “If *you* weren’t blabbing about it on the phone...”

“How was I supposed to know that Clay was talking to Mr Student Council President there?” Nick cries.

“Well, what’s done is done,” Zak says, hands behind his head. “All we gotta do is find out who’s been kidnapping people and making them do dangerous part-time jobs and we’re off the hook, right?”

“Probably,” Floris says, “but I wouldn’t put it past Eret to leak our identities to the authorities after we settled this.”

“Okay, so we’re really taking up this job?” Nick asks, gaze darting from one person to the other.

“Yeah,” Floris says. “Eret’s holding all the cards in his hand, so it’s not like we can go against him. We’ve made a serious error, but not a critical one. Let’s make use of this opportunity to bounce back.”

“What does our leader think?” Darryl asks.

Clay sighs, long and deep. “I think Floris has a very good point. We should finish Eret’s job and get into his good graces. He’s also less likely to report us in the future.”

“Totally down for that,” Zak says, nodding.

“Now then, we know nothing about this situation,” Clay says. “All we do know is that several of Enderlands High students have been getting into some kind of shady part-time job businesses. And the fact that there are rumours flying around that the Kris Family is behind it.”

“Sounds about right. We’re really short on information this time,” Floris says.

“How about we spend tomorrow searching for information?” Zak asks.

“I have work. Until eight.”

“Then how about Wednesday?” Darryl asks. “I think we should do it when everyone’s free. We don’t know who we’re up against.”

“I agree,” Floris says. “So, Wednesday, then? Clear your schedules, everyone. We’re totally going to wow Eret with the change of heart!”

That meeting ends on a lighter note than Clay would have expected. Zak and Darryl leave first, while Nick and Clay head on over to the nearby bread shop to buy a snack before returning home.

“Do you think we can trust him?” Nick asks as he chomps down on his egg bread.

“Probably. He needs us out of jail as much as we need him not to report us,” Clay says. “I’d say we just investigate for now. We can cross the bridge when we come to it.”

“Sometimes, I don’t know if you’re some kind of scheming mastermind or another kind of reckless.”

Clay laughs. The situation seems dire right now, but they can turn it around. Clay knows they can.

*

Chapter End Notes

Sun arcana rank 9 -> 10 (MAX)
Charm +3 (working at convenience store)
Temperance arcana rank 4 -> 5
Guts +2 (shady clinical trial)
Hierophant arcana rank 1 -> 2
Proficiency +3 (working at gun shop)
Knowledge +3 (tuition)
Tower arcana rank 3 -> 4

i'm not sure i ever finished an s link/confidant this early or did i? i don't rmbr. maybe i did for yoshida or ng+ takemi. wanted to do ryuji's one ASAP cos of insta-kill but like his was blocked off until much later

Shady Business

Chapter Summary

the true nature of the shady part-time jobs

Chapter Notes

WARNING: Mentions of drugs

hey all now we're officially rolling into the third arc

i wonder did i confuse people with the prev chapter?

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

6/15 – MONDAY – EVENING

“Clay, I would like to ask your opinion on an important matter.”

Clay looks over at where Mrs Armstrong is tossing some vegetables in a pan, the fire blazing from the stove. The smell is wonderful, especially after she adds a pinch of spices and herbs.

“I’d be happy to help.”

“For starters, I would like to know what Nick thinks.”

Ah, it seems that they have come to that. While not obvious, Clay can tell that Mrs Armstrong cares for Nick a whole lot. The only chasm that divides them happens to be how she copes with Neil’s death – Mrs Armstrong choosing to believe that her son lives on in Nick, while hurting Nick in the process.

“Thinks about what?”

“About...his...me. About me. If he has mentioned me before.”

“He has,” Clay says, “and he loves you a lot.”

Mrs Armstrong sprinkles some salt into the dish, humming. “Why was he angry, then, that day? Was it something I said?”

Clay would never have thought to hear such tenderness in her voice, not since she dons her ruthless prosecutor front every time they see her. Mrs Armstrong looks somewhat vulnerable, her façade cracked and on the way to shattering.

“Yeah,” Clay says. “He doesn’t think that you consider him his own individual. He says that you treat him like Neil, who he isn’t.”

Mrs Armstrong asks him to pass her the canola oil, which Clay acquiesces. The oil sizzles as it flows into the pan. She places the bottle back on the counter, stirring the vegetables some more.

“Perhaps I have been a little unreasonable.”

Well, Clay hadn’t been expecting that development. Not for her to give in so easily, at least.

“What should I do?” Mrs Armstrong muses. “I’ve never wanted Nick to hate me to this extent.”

“It’s a suggestion, but why not cook his favourite food?” Clay asks. He continues to wash the used pans. “Instead of cooking Neil’s.”

Mrs Armstrong seems to consider this, a contemplative frown on her lips. “I apologize, but may I ask...”

Hmm, now this is a problem Clay can help her with. “I can ask him for you.”

Mrs Armstrong flashes him a grateful smile that sends warmth into Clay’s chest. “I have to thank you for that, Clay.”

Clay scrubs the pans, rubbing them with the sponge till they’re sparkling clean. Mrs Armstrong is willing to own up to her own mistakes and to try to fix them, and that is the best outcome of this conversation that Clay can ever hope for.

*

6/16 – TUESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“Hey, you work here too, green man? Or rather, *pink* man?” Tommy sniggers, sauntering up to Clay and handing him a sandwich, which Clay scans. Tommy pays him with a crumpled dollar bill.

“Like a bag with that?” Clay says, bored. Ruby doesn’t come in anymore, so it’s boring, but his contract is ending this Saturday anyway.

“Nah,” Tommy says, grabbing the sandwich and ripping its wrapper apart, crunching on the juicy lettuce and ham. “Damn, that’s cold.”

“Microwaves are not for the sandwiches,” Clay deadpans, “so you can stop staring at it now.”

“Aw dang it,” Tommy mumbles, taking another bite into his sandwich.

“What are you doing here alone? Aren’t you supposed to be hanging out at the arcade or something?” Clay says, leaning on the counter. The only worker other than himself is a new hire, a shy girl who does not appear much older than Ruby. She doesn’t speak to him, not out of nothing but fear, if the cautious glances she’s been throwing him are any indication. Talking to customers is fine till another one comes in.

“Tubbo’s busy,” Tommy says. “With his hacking shit.”

“Little kids shouldn’t curse.”

“Say that again, green man, and I will punch you. Don’t make me punch you,” Tommy says, glaring up at him with that sandwich between his teeth. “Tubbo says my punches are mean.”

“Are they?” Clay yawns. The door opens with a jingle and Clay watches as two youngsters in drab clothing amble up to Tommy, their hands in their pockets.

“Oi, Tommy.”

[Tommy](#) whirls around and glares at them. Unlike the playful one he threw Clay earlier, this one is scarier, even more so with that glint in his eye. He chews pointedly at his sandwich. “Whaddya want, Manifold? Oh, and I see you brought Poki too.”

“I want you to come back, Tommy,” the boy called Manifold says. “The Family thinks you’re disrespecting them.”

“Huh? Why’s that?” Tommy says, crumpling the sandwich wrapper in his fist, which he then places on the counter. Clay stares at it, slightly offended, but it does not outweigh his curiosity at this encounter. He quietly disposes of it into the trash bin.

“They raised you, Tommy. The Family raised you and now you’re leavin’,” the girl called Poki says. Clay can smell alcohol on her. “If that isn’t an ingrate, I don’t know what is.”

“Just shut the fuck up, okay,” Tommy says, grabbing Poki by the collar. Poki shrieks. Clay feels like he should do something, but... “Especially you, Poki. You make me sick.” With great force, he pushes Poki away. She stumbles back, crashing into the shelves and sending foodstuffs spilling onto the ground.

“I’ll remember this, Tommy! You mark my words, I wi-“ Poki screams. Clay thanks his lucky stars that the shop is empty right now. Poki is held back by Manifold, who shakes his head. He bows his head, apologizes for the mess, and hurriedly pulls Poki back and out of the store.

“Who was that?” Clay asks.

“Huh? Those?” Tommy frowns, scuffing his shoes against the floor. “Family goons. The Punz Family. They found me as a kid and brought me up. I repaid my debt though, but they keep sending goons after me. They want me back, but I don’t wanna go back.”

Maybe this is why Phil asked Clay to keep an eye on him. Tommy, that is.

Tommy’s phone buzzes. He checks his messages. “Oh, Tubbo’s done. I’m gonna go meet him now. Bye, green man.”

He takes off before Clay can respond, disappearing out the door with the speed of a lightning bolt. The shy girl is picking up the foodstuffs that have dropped with the daintiness of a lady. Clay sighs, heading over to help her.

*

[6/16 – TUESDAY – EVENING](#)

“What’s your favourite food?”

“My favourite food? You’re gonna treat me to dinner?” Nick asks, whirling around in his seat.

“Hell no,” Clay says, chucking an eraser at him. “I’m a broke high school student.”

“Don’t bullshit me,” Nick says. “You keep all the riches we make in the Metaverse. You’re the richest one out of all of us.” He leans forward. “But seriously, what’s this about?”

“Uh, I can’t tell you,” Clay says. “It’s a surprise. So tell me, you, as Darryl likes to say, muffin head.”

Nick chokes out a laugh. “Fine, fine. I like Filipino food, like adobo, but seriously, if you’re planning on packing me lunch, just don’t get me shepherd’s pie. Or anything with broccoli.”

“I’m *not* planning on packing you lunch. I’m asking for someone else.”

Nick raises a brow. “Yeah, yeah, that’s what they all say.” He turns back to his computer screen, leaving Clay to study. At some point in time, Floris descends the staircase, dragging Clay’s hoodie with his teeth and curls up beside him.

*

6/17 – WEDNESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“Now that I think about it, don’t you have work today too?” Nick asks.

“Called in sick,” Clay says. They are standing at the accessway at the station, which has thus become their new hideout while they gather information. “So, let’s go through what we’re supposed to do today.”

“Alright, listen up, everyone. We’re going to have to find out more about our target,” Floris says. “We’re going to scour the streets for any signs of shady part-time jobs, okay? We’ll split up and look into it separately. Keep your phones on hand, and if anything happens, call us. Any of us, alright?”

“Right,” Zak says.

“Good,” Floris says. “Let’s hop to it!”

The group heads up to ground level and walks off in different directions, keeping their phones in hand. Darryl mentioned that he was going to look around the underground mall, while Nick is going to check out the station square. Zak strides off in the direction of the residential district, which leaves Clay with central street.

“Wow, they sure move fast,” Floris says, peering around. “Right, let’s move!”

The easiest way to find these supposed gangsters is to become a target himself, Clay thinks. However, that may not necessarily be the safest option. He clutches his phone between his fingers. He has Nick on speed dial, so if anything happens, he’d at least be able to inform one person.

“Hey there, pretty boy.”

That was quick.

Clay glances up, meeting the man’s gaze from under his hood. “May I help you?”

“You seem like a student. From Enderlands High?” the man says, accompanied by another sleazy man, both their hands tucked into their pockets. Clay turns around fully to face them, forcing himself not to tremble, or show the slightest sign of weakness.

“What’s it to you?”

“Whoa, whoa, using that kinda talk ain’t gonna faze us,” the man says, laughing. “Y’know, being a student, you musta be sorta poor, aren’tcha?”

Could this be? Did Clay just strike gold?

“Maybe...” Clay mumbles, casting his gaze downwards. These men’s shoes are in crap condition, their soles almost torn from the bottoms of the shoes, their laces so dirty they are nearly black. If it’s gangsters they’re looking for...

“You want a part-time job? Something so simple even students can do? We’re not lookin’ for experience or nothin’.”

“I’m interested,” Clay says. He throws furtive glances around. No policemen on standby – the coast is clear. “What do I need to do?”

“You just need to deliver this package,” the man says, waving a white envelope in front of Clay’s face. “If you agree, we’ll tell you where to deliver it to. And we pay super well. A couple hundred? It’s yours.”

No wonder they manage to rope in students who don’t know any better. The deal sounds as suspicious as heck. Clay turns. “Sorry, I think I’ll pass.”

“You serious, kid?” the man says, grabbing Clay’s shoulder. “Yo-“ He pauses suddenly, face going as white as a sheet as Clay stares him down. He backs off, the package held between his fingers. “Alright, go then! See whether you still enjoy living your pathetic little peasant life!”

“Don’t let him get to you,” Floris whispers. Clay blows air past his lips. He can’t believe he just did that. To a gangster, of all people.

“It’s still pretty suspicious,” Floris says. “What do you think they’re doing with that...whole envelope thing.”

“I don’t know yet,” Clay says. “But I didn’t want to accept that job either.”

Floris nods. “What about the others?”

Clay pulls out his phone. Already, there are a ton of messages from the other Thieves in their chat group. He opens up the log and scrolls through them.

So Darryl found out a couple of people talking about protein. Not sure whether that’s a cause for concern, and Nick found nothing at all. Zak, on the other hand, did hear about ice...or something like that, he says.

“Isn’t ICE some kinda drug?” Floris says. Clay types it into the group chat.

Zak: Really?

Darryl: Yeah it’s possible.

Zak: okay want me to go beat those guys up?

Me: we’re not beating anyone up

Nick: guys it’ll make sense if theyre getting people to deliver drugs for them

Me: wow here comes nick’s big brain moment

Nick: Shhh

Nick: If the students agree and deliver them and the people who put them up to it somehow get proof of them delivering the drugs

Nick: then those students can be blackmailed, right?

Darryl: So you're telling me that those students are blackmailed?

Nick: ya basically

“Hmm, do you think the Kris Family is behind this, like what we’ve been hearing?” Floris mumbles. “Let’s gather everyone at the hideout. We can discuss more there.”

Clay summons the Thieves to the accessway and slips his phone back into his pocket. Out of his periphery, he seems to catch sight of someone familiar in the shadows, sunglasses hooked onto his collar. Clay pretends not to have noticed and heads back past the throngs of people towards the station.

Eret blatantly standing there could have been a trick of the light.

*

6/17 – WEDNESDAY - EVENING

“Drugs, huh?”

“Yeah,” Clay says. They are sitting at the same greasy diner for dinner, ordering the same greasy food they always do. “I was asked to deliver some package.”

“If we pair that up with what Zak found out, then we can safely assume that they’re using students to smuggle drugs from one rendezvous point to another, and blackmailing the students for money,” Floris says.

“So we need to figure out who this group is,” Nick says. “I’m betting they’re the Kris family.”

“Even so, we can’t target a whole organization,” Floris says. “A Palace only exists for a single person.”

“We don’t even know if the Kris Family is the perpetrator,” Darryl points out. “We’re just making assumptions at this point.”

“And it doesn’t help that we’ve got a fourteen-day time limit,” Nick says. “I mean, we’ve still got plenty of time, but...”

“We’ve worked with tighter deadlines before,” Clay says.

“That’s when we knew the target’s name and distortion and stuff,” Nick says. “We don’t even know which gang’s out there telling kids to deliver drugs.”

“Keep it down,” Darryl says in a hushed voice. It doesn’t seem like anyone from the other tables have noticed their topic of conversation. Being a busy diner, their voices must have been drowned out with the rest of the crowd’s.

“Okay, as long as we make good on time, we should be able to do what is asked of us in the two weeks,” Floris says. “Why don’t we go back and think on this a little more. We can meet up tomorrow, or Friday, since we’re all free on Friday.”

“Yeah, I think we need a rest too,” Darryl says. “Oh, right, I wanted to ask Clay.”

“Hmm?”

“What do you think of Eret?”

The table goes silent, apart from Zak, who’s still slurping up his pasta.

“Oh, right, who *is* that Eret guy?” Zak asks. “You guys owe me an explanation, because he just arrived on the scene without any backstory whatsoever.”

“He’s just an annoying Student Council president,” Nick says. “An annoying Student Council President who found out about us being the Phantom Thieves.”

“Honestly, the initiatives he implements are good sometimes,” Darryl says. “He’s just...he’s a little...sometimes he’s just...”

“Unreasonable,” Nick says, puffing his cheeks out. “Keeps going on about sincerity this, fairness that...it’s annoying.”

“I see.”

“Honestly,” Clay says. “I don’t think he poses much of a threat, not if we can take down our target within the next two weeks.”

“What I meant is that he knows about the Metaverse,” Darryl says. “And do you remember what Marion said to Zak? She told him something about a black mask, didn’t she? There’s someone else besides us that knows about the Metaverse.”

“You think it’s Eret?” Floris asks. “He’s not doing anything wrong, though, even if he is. Maybe he’s just tailing us. Like what he’s been doing just now.”

“Oh, it’s not just me?” Nick says, scratching his head. “He was tailing you guys too?”

“Yeah,” Floris says. “In any case, it’s more irritating than dangerous, so I suggest we just bear with it for now. But the problem remains is that if he continues to tail us, he can enter the Metaverse. With us.”

“How’s that a problem? The dude can probably handle his own just fine,” Nick says.

“The Shadows have been getting stronger. We don’t need someone randomly dying in the Metaverse,” Floris says.

So Floris felt that too. The elevating strength of their enemies. It takes more bullets to incapacitate them. More swings of their swords and blunt weapons to even make a dent on their skin.

“Our goal here is just to operate as per usual without Eret noticing us,” Darryl says.

“Which is easier said than done,” Zak says, finishing up his pasta. “He’s been literally following each of us the whole day.”

Clay massages his temple. This discussion is going nowhere. They aren’t sure what to do about Eret, who apparently knows about the Metaverse, and they have no clue as to who is behind the drug ring they’re up against. All they have are mere blind guesses.

The waitress comes to clear their plates and the group stands to leave. The trio bids Zak and Darryl goodbye at the station, and Clay, Nick and Floris make their way back home.

“Do you have, like, any connections or anything?” Nick asks as the train trundles along the underground.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I dunno. You seem to know people in the weirdest of places,” Nick says, shrugging.

“I can think of one person we can ask,” Floris says. “He’s not from the same gang, but it’s worth a shot.”

Nick’s eyes widen. “Dude, never, *ever* mention that in front of my mom. She’ll go apeshit crazy and kill the both of us.”

Clay certainly does not want Mrs Armstrong to, as Nick put it, kill the both of them. He zips his lips, and Nick nods in satisfaction. The conversation that evolves from that is full of speculation and baseless conjecture, none of which are supported by any sort of evidence.

Knowledge, it seems, really *is* power.

Chapter End Notes

Empress arcana rank 2 -> 3

Proficiency +3 (cooking)

Charm +3 (working at convenience store)

Death arcana rank 1 -> 2

Knowledge +3 (studying)

The Informant

Chapter Summary

in which dream gets info and eret gets taken away by thugs

Chapter Notes

I seriously cant believe i pumped out like 2 chapters using this secret technique ive been withholding.

And that's to type everything in comic sans. for me, it seriously works. i have no idea why

anyway, hope you enjoy this one

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

6/18 – THURSDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“You here for lessons, green man?”

Clay shakes his head. He can hardly hear Tommy over the jarring cacophony of screams and game noises. Tommy places the Gun About controller back into its holster.

“I’m here for information,” Clay says.

“Me? I’m just a middle schooler.” Then, realization dawns on his face. “Oh. I think we should talk about this outside.”

Tommy leads the way, walking down an alleyway that Clay would never enter in a million years, littered with rolling balls of newspaper and other random types of trash. Tommy sure knows his way around the network of alleyways, because in record time, they reach the narrow pathway right outside Untouchable.

“So, what do you want to know?”

“There’s been a string of scams recently,” Clay says. “Around here. Do you know anything about it?”

Tommy leans against the wall. “Heard some stuff. Here and there.”

“We’ve heard that these people are affiliated with the Kris Family.”

“The Krises?” Tommy pushes himself off the wall. “No one goes up against the Krises. They’re... they’re the most powerful gang in the city!”

“Are they behind this, Tommy? I just want to know that.”

Tommy stares down at the ground. “Yeah. They’re behind it. That’s what I heard from Manifold, but that’s not the point, green man!”

“Do you know the name of their leader?”

Tommy looks exasperated, which is not an expression Clay would expect to see on him. “I have no idea. Their leader is one of the *most* powerful men in this city and for all intents and purposes his identity is kept secret. So secret that only his right-hand men know who he is.”

That’s a problem. A big one.

“But!” Tommy says, and makes a sweeping gesture towards Untouchable. “Big P knows everything about the Kris Family so I think you should ask him instead.”

Big P is...Phil, right? But why would he know everything about the Kris Family? Did Phil associate with them in the past as well?

“Don’t tell anyone I told you all this, alright, green man?” Tommy says. “I’ll see you back at the arcade. If you’re not dead.”

Clay watches as Tommy leaves, striding down the same way they came. He turns to Untouchable, to the blinking green lights making up its name, at the sheer number of model guns on display. Clay pushes the door open, the bell above jingling as he does.

Phil looks up.

“Oh, it’s you. You’re not working today. Or did you want to buy something?”

[“I need](#) information,” Clay says, walking up to the counter. “I need to know who the boss of the Kris Family is.”

“The Kris Family?” Phil’s face is priceless, with that incredulous expression plastered all over. “Why do you want to know about them?”

Clay shifts his weight from one foot to the other. Well, he hadn’t thought this far.

“You’re not planning on joining the mafia, are you?” Phil says, going back to his magazine. “All I can say is: don’t do it.”

“I’m not planning on joining the mafia,” Clay says quickly. “I need it for...uh...a school project.” He can almost hear Floris snickering at him, muffled by the bag.

“A school project?” Phil narrows his eyes.

“Please, Mr Phil.”

Phil sighs deeply. “You seem like a good kid and I don’t believe you’re going to...go against the law or anything so...” Phil lets out another, longer sigh. Clay feels like he’s disappointing so many people with a single question.

“James Kris. The current head of the Kris Family,” Phil says. “Not even the police knows that name; I got it from my own investigation. In any case, that’s all I’ve got for you, kid, and I’d advise you not to dig any deeper.”

Clay flashes him a grateful smile. “Thanks, Mr Phil, you’re the best.”

“Flattery gets you nowhere, kid.”

Clay laughs and exits the store.

“So,” Floris peeks out from his bag. “We’ve got our target’s name. Let’s see if we can get a hit.”

Clay accesses the Meta-Nav and inputs “James Kris” into it. When the space distorts around him, even if it’s just a second, the thrill that jolts through him is satisfying.

“Alright, now it’s just the place and the distortion,” Floris says. “We should discuss this with everyone else.”

They had agreed to meet up tomorrow, so in the best-case scenario, they can begin infiltration then and will have plenty of time to steal the Treasure. Hope soars in Clay’s chest.

Me: I got a name

Nick: NICEEEE

Darryl: good job !

Zak: YOOOOO

Me: but I don’t have the distortion nor place

Zak: oh that sucks

Darryl: dw about it. We can figure it out tmr

Nick: so where we meeting?

Darryl: Big Bang Burger?

It must be the trauma, but Clay *does* feel sick when he hears that name.

Me: Sure

Zak: ok

Nick: tmr after school we go there straight

[It’s settled.](#) Clay is about to lock his phone and head back to the station when he sees another message blinking on the screen.

George: hey I’m free. Wanna hang out? This is George, btw

Clay wastes no time in replying with the biggest, stupidest grin on his face.

*

[6/18 – THURSDAY – EVENING](#)

“Thanks for coming out with me,” George says, looking up and down at a variety of televisions. “You didn’t have to.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Clay says. Floris has gone to take a walk around Elytra, because he, apparently, cannot stand Clay’s immense “lovebird” energy radiating from every pore of his body.

“What kind of TV are you looking for?”

“Hmm. Something that’s cheaper, but functional,” George says. He shakes his head, frowning. “These are all on the higher end of the price tag.”

“What kind of TV are you using at home?”

“CRT, actually,” George says, rubbing at his nape. “It’s a little cheapskate, I know, but...uh, money used to be kind of tight and we didn’t have a chance to replace it.”

“‘We’?”

“I live with my sister,” George says. “Gina loves television. She would watch it for hours.”

“How old is she?” Without realizing, the duo seems to have migrated over to the tiny section at the other end of floor selling old CRTs.

“Thirteen.”

So she’s younger by four years...

Clay opens his mouth to speak, but at that very moment, salesman approaches them, listing off the various functions each television has. Clay has absolutely no idea what the man is going on about, but George seems to be nodding (a little absently, if he might add), still staring at the televisions (or rather, the price tags...)

They eventually manage to tear away from the salesman, ending up on the streets of Elytra once again. Elytra is a sleepless town, flashing lights sparkling and glimmering from old electronic stores and game shops, arcades and strip malls selling all things electric.

“Well, that trip was a bust,” George says, laughing. “But man, that guy just didn’t want to let us go.”

“Tell me about it,” Clay mutters.

“I guess I gotta go back now,” George says. “I gotta go get some dinner with Gina.”

Their first date (in Clay’s eyes) is ending all too soon. The walk to the station suddenly seems a little too short, the station sign a little too near. Oh, there’s this roadside stall selling sandwiches...

“Hey, you hungry?”

George stifles a laugh. “We just had dinner about an hour ago.”

“Think of it as supper. A really early supper,” Clay says. He remembers Mrs Armstrong mentioning something about being late, probably reaching home around midnight, so Clay isn’t too worried when the sun is setting.

“Oh why the hell not,” George says, a knowing smile on his face. Clay bites his cheeks, trying not to grin like a psychopath as he proceeds to purchase two cheese sandwiches for himself and George.

They find a place to stand by the street, munching happily on their sandwiches, watching cars driving by, people strolling with their friends and family, giant billboards on skyscraper malls showcasing the new movie premiere or new gaming console just released.

“So, should we come by again to find your TV?”

George shakes his head. “Nah, I’m probably going to check out Beatty next. There’s a tiny appliance shop there. Mostly secondhand stuff, so I can get those for cheap.”

“It’s got to last, though.”

George shrugs, mouth stuffed full of cheese and bread. “Yeah, well...I’ve saving up to buy a new monitor too. Man, all our stuff is just breaking down.”

“How old a house do you live in?”

“We haven’t replaced most of our stuff for, like, five years? Or so?” George says. “It was our mother’s house.”

“Was?”

George falls silent, staring at his sneakers. Clay knows better than to pursue it.

“The sun’s going down. Shall we go?” George says. He walks over to a garbage can and disposes of the wrapper.

Clay nods. He finishes up his food as well and follows George over to the train station. The conversation shifts to more light-hearted topics, such as their plans for Independence Day and complaints about schoolteachers. Clay finds Floris waiting for him by the gantry, the centre of attention of a number of children. He hops up to Clay, clambering into Clay’s bag, eliciting a laugh from George and a chorus of whines from the children.

“How was your date?” Floris teases.

Clay hums as he taps his card. He would telepathically send Floris a message, but unfortunately reality doesn’t work that way.

He and George get the same train, but part ways at Valentine Hills. George still waves to him from inside the train, which Clay thinks is super cute, gaze following George even as the train rattles away.

“You have it fucking bad,” Floris says.

“Yeah, well, it was perfect. Didn’t ask for your opinion, fox.” Clay sighs. “He cares so much for his sister.”

“Uh huh.” Floris sniffs. “I’m still sensing an unholy amount of ‘lovebird energy’ from you. But I’m just gonna shut up and let you enjoy your first date.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

*

[6/19 – FRIDAY – AFTER SCHOOL](#)

“So, first, the location,” Floris says. The Phantom Thieves are gathered at the station square, right at the entrance. As expected, Valentine Hills is bustling on a Friday afternoon. “Congratulations. We have absolutely no leads to go on!”

“Well, he’s a mob boss,” Zak points out. “We should think about what mob bosses like, probably.”

Clay taps the Location box on the Meta-Nav. “Okay. Start throwing out ideas.”

“Maybe he owns a casino or something,” Nick says.

No match, the Meta-Nav tells them.

“Or maybe like...the subway?” Darryl tries.

No match.

“Why would it be the subway?” Clay asks. Darryl shrugs.

“How the heck are we supposed to know where it is?” Zak sighs in exasperation. “I mean, it could be anywhere in all of Valentine Hills!”

“Wait,” Clay says, eyes widened. “I got a hit.”

“You got a what? What did I say?” Zak exchanges shocked glances with the rest of the team. Clay holds up his phone: *All of Valentine Hills* written in the location.

“Makes sense, since he basically controls the underground world and all,” Nick says, folding his arms. “Still, I’d never guess it in a million years.”

“Okay, so we got it by chance,” Floris says. “But that’s good. We still got it. Now, the distortion.”

“Dude, that could be anything,” Nick says.

“Uh...castle? Like Kronos’?” Darryl asks.

No match.

“Casino!” Zak cries.

No match.

“Uh...palace?”

Floris sniggers at that.

“Diamond mine?” Clay asks, inviting stares from the rest of the team. “What?”

“Where did diamond mine even come from?” Nick laughs. “Dude, he’s a gangster, not a miner.”

“Well, if you never try, you’d never know,” Clay says, ears turning a bright red.

“If only we can meet this James Kris guy in person,” Nick says, leaning against the wall. “Then we’d be able to...”

[“You](#) want to meet James Kris?”

Clay jumps out of his skin, only barely noticing Eret’s presence as the latter walks over to them, having blended into the crowd. That guy moves like a shadow. Even Floris and Darryl seem surprised.

“This has got nothing to do with you,” Nick says flatly.

“Well I...” Eret coughs into his hand. “I can help you do that.”

Darryl furrows his brow. “I’d rather you not involve yourself in this.”

“I can handle it,” Eret insists, adjusting his tie.

“It’s dangerous,” Floris says. “This is the mafia we’re talking about. And this James Kris guy is their boss.”

“I know that,” Eret says, not once losing his composure. “I can-“

“Look, Eret. Can’t you just accept the fact that we don’t want you here? We don’t need your fucking help,” Nick says, stepping forward. Eret takes a step back. From his hesitation and the way he brushes a lock of hair behind his ear, something has snapped within him.

“Language, Nick, and that was harsh,” Darryl hisses. “Eret, we...umm...”

“No, don’t apologize,” Eret says. “I understand that I’m rather hated by the student body.”

“Yeah, you know it,” Nick mutters.

“Nick!” Darryl snaps.

Eret isn’t sticking around to listen. Without another word, he slips away, another nameless face in the crowd of shifting bodies.

“You didn’t have to say it like that,” Darryl says.

“But it’s the truth and he should know it,” Nick says. “Anyway, he’s not important right now. We should focus on finding out the dis-“

Clay’s phone begins to ring, the call screen drawing over the Meta-Nav app. It’s from an unknown number, with a +1 at its front. Clay picks it up. An unusual deep voice greets him from the other end. One that Clay knows all too well.

“Good. You picked up. Now, don’t hang up whatever you do-“

“First of all, how did you get this number?” Clay hisses. The rest of the Thieves are silent, as if listening in on the conversation.

“Student records. Look, I can apologize for snooping around in your files and that it was, quite probably, a breach of privacy...”

“Hell yeah it is!”

“But I hope you’ll forgive me after this. I will prove myself helpful. Useful and helpful,” Eret says. “Now, whatever you do, don’t hang up. Oh, and please record this call.”

Clay is about to do just that, thumb hovering over the “hang up” icon when he hears shouting on the other end that is unmistakably Eret’s voice. He slams it against his ear again.

“Hey! I want you to take me to your boss.”

“Huh?”

“That bastard, what is he doing?” Nick mutters. Clay quickly rips it from his ear, pressing the

record button, and puts the call on loudspeaker.

“How’d you know that name?” one of the unfamiliar voices asks.

“That doesn’t matter,” Eret says. “All I need you to do is to take me to him.”

“The boss doesn’t just see anyone. Who do you think you are, demanding us like that?”

“Would you rather I leaked your boss’s name to the police?”

Right, Phil *did* mention that not even the police knows who the head of the Kris Family is.

There is uncomfortable silence on the other end, then one of the gruff voices speaks for a while, nothing more than an unintelligible crackle.

“The boss said he’ll see ya.”

[“What?”](#) Floris cries. “Guys! We have to find him, now! Move!”

Clay does not hang up, but he is hardly listening to the conversation anymore. What the actual fuck is Eret *thinking*? They jostle through the crowd, attracting weird stares and noises of disdain, but their schoolmate’s life is in danger and they don’t have time...

“There!” Nick shouts. Clay’s head snaps in the direction that Nick is pointing at. Sure enough, in the middle of the alleyway where a gym is situated, is Eret, being led away by two thugs towards a black sedan. One of the thugs opens the door and shoves Eret inside. The other gets into the passenger seat and the car begins to move on, fumes blasting from its exhaust pipe.

“Shit! We’re gonna lose them!” Zak leaps onto the road, in front of an incoming taxi.

“Zak, you muffin head!” Darryl cries, but the taxi screeches to a halt. Clay almost sees smoke on the rubber. Still, the Thieves hurriedly get in, piling into the backseat while Zak sits in front.

“Follow that car!” Zak points at the black car speeding away, having turned right at the junction ahead. The taxi driver is disgruntled, but steps on it anyway. Clay’s fingers clench the backrest of Zak’s seat.

Please...*please* let them make it in time...

*

Chapter End Notes

Magician arcana rank 1 -> 2

Eret

Chapter Summary

in which they begin infiltration

in which eret owes kris \$30,000,000

Chapter Notes

every time they summon their Personas I keep wanting to write "dream whips out his Evoker, barrel against his temple, and pulls the trigger"

6/19 – FRIDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

Zak kicks the door open, revealing a set of staircase that leads them further underground. This is where they saw Eret being manhandled towards. The stench of alcohol wafts from the den, mingling with the reek of cheap cigarette smoke. Clay runs down the stairs two at a time, kicking open the other door at the bottom, revealing a room that is so dazzling pink.

“Wha-?” the thugs from earlier spin around, jaws agape.

“You piece of shits!” A black muscular man decked in gold stands from where he was seated on his plush velvet couch. “You were followed!”

Clay scans the room, gaze zoning in on Eret pinned to the ground by another two thugs, face pressed against the floor, grimacing, his arms held behind his back.

“Clay?” Eret starts, only to wince when a thug twists his arm.

“Eret, you fucking idiot!” Nick shouts, only to shut up when the muscular man points a pistol at them. From the looks of that thing, it’s certainly no thirty-calibre. Clay would place it at...forty-something? That thing could potentially blast a hole in their bodies with a single pull of the trigger.

“They’re a bunch of kids,” the man says, keeping the barrel trained on them. Clay narrows his eyes. He must be the head honcho, James Kris. “If they were police, I’d have you killed on the spot.”

The thugs that had kidnapped Eret whimper in fear, standing off to the side.

“Let him go,” Clay says, clenching his fists, hoping Kris doesn’t notice him trembling.

“Huh?” the man rolls his neck, joints cracking. “You say somethin’?”

“I said, let him go-“

“Do you have a death wish?” Floris hisses in Clay’s ear.

“Oh, you’ve got a pet fox too. How cute,” the man says. He drops his gun, settling back into his seat and pulls out his phone. The scantily-clad woman beside him sidles up to him, placing a palm flat on his chest as he throws an arm around her shoulder. Before Clay realizes what’s happening, he is met with a blinding flash. “You know, you just rushed right into enemy territory, brats. I could have you skinned right now if I wanted to. Wear your hides like trophies.”

Clay stuffs his hands into his pockets. No sign of fear. Not now.

“Or I could just pimp you guys out, you know. Make you work for your non-existent freedom,” Kris says. “But that’s not funny. That’s not interesting.” He leans forward, clicking open the briefcase on the table. “Cass, how much was that bag you wanted? That crocodile skin one?”

“Thirty million dollars.”

What kind of fucking bag costs thirty million dollars? A bad feeling takes root in the pit of Clay’s stomach.

Kris retrieves three thick wads of bills from his briefcase and hands it to the woman. “There you go. Now you can go get that bag you wanted.”

Cass squeals, pressing her body flush against Kris’. The butterflies churn in Clay’s stomach, making him want to puke. Kris turns the briefcase around, gesturing to the spot where the thirty million dollars were.

“See this hole here where my thirty million dollars went?” Kris says. “You guys are gonna help fill this gap up. Thirty million dollars, in three weeks’ time,” Kris says. “Or this guy gets it.” He drops his cigarette to the ground and grinds his shoe against it, stubbing it out. “There are five of you. I’m sure you can get enough money if you begged your parents for extra pocket money.”

With a wave of Kris’ hand, the thug holding Eret lets him go, and Eret rubs at his shoulder, stumbling back to Clay’s side.

“You crossed the wrong guy,” Kris says. “Don’t you know that this whole city is my personal vault?” He lights another cigarette. “Don’t bother calling the police. I have evidence you kids are down here, you know.” Kris waves his phone in their faces. “Let’s see, what was in the picture? Drugs, alcohol...man, the police are gonna have a field day with you guys.” He shoves his phone back into his pocket. “Now get outta here.”

Clay exchanges despondent glances with the rest, then turns tail. They will get him back. And they have just the information they need to do so.

*

6/19 – FRIDAY – EVENING

“I...I have to formally apologize.”

Eret looks nothing like the confident, the put-together Student Council president that he is known to be. Clay has never seen someone who looks so down, so crestfallen, unable to even meet their gazes.

“I clearly didn’t think this through and it led to...getting the rest of you involved...”

“What’s done is done,” Clay says. They are currently surrounded by people, even more than the afternoon. The pubs around the station square are lit up, signs advertising new drinks and happy

hours plastered all over their walls and windows. Clay boots up the Meta-Nav. “Thanks to your stupidity, we got the information we need.”

“Information you need?”

“You’ve seen this before, right?” Clay says, holding out his phone. The group crowds around it.

“Yeah, I’ve seen it.”

“This is what we use to enter the Metaverse,” Clay says. “Basically, you input someone’s name, and if you feel like, this, warp-y feeling around you, that means you got a hit. So for instance, we have James Kris, that mob boss, and by chance we find out that he views all of Valentine Hills through a distorted lens.”

“Is that how you turned the school into that castle?”

“Yeah,” Darryl says. “We didn’t exactly turn it into a castle. We just entered another world where the castle replaces the school, because Mr Krones saw the castle as the school.”

“In essence, you went into a world created entirely by his mind, am I wrong?” Eret asks.

“Ooh, he’s good,” Floris says, clapping with his tiny paws. He glances over at Nick and Clay. “Better than the two of you.”

“Hey!”

“Anyway, so the castle, that museum...those are all Palaces, creations by the minds of those who have distorted desires. That is how they see those places in reality in their heads,” Darryl explains.

“Museum?” Eret asks.

“Oh, our second Palace that we infiltrated. Marion’s,” Clay says. “I’m assuming that you made your way into the Metaverse by accident when we were infiltrating Krones’ castle.”

“So anyone nearby can get sucked in.”

“Pretty much,” Clay says. “So, now we’re going to infiltrate Kris’ Palace. So his full name is James Kris, he sees all of Valentine Hills as a bank.”

Match found. Beginning navigation.

[The](#) world shifts around them, space distorting and warping. When they emerge in the Metaverse, all they see is a darker version of the streets they were standing at. Dream has already changed out into his Phantom Thief outfit, emerald coat swishing around his calves.

“Eh? Eret?”

Eret is dressed in a green tank top that clings to his body, a vest with a khaki-design draped over his torso. His ash-coloured mask looks like that of a VR headset, strapped tightly to his head. Spiked bangles line his arms, sharp enough to injure anyone who dares stand too close. His pants are a platinum grey, fabric bunched up where his pant legs are tucked into his military-style boots.

“That’s...some getup you have there,” Sapnap says, somewhat impressed.

“Can you walk in all that?” Dream stifles a laugh.

“So it’s true,” Eret muses, looking down at himself. “When you come to this other world, the Metaverse, right? Your outfits change.”

“Yeah,” Fundy says. “This is what each one of us thinks rebellion looks like.”

“You take on another form when you are in the Metaverse?”

Fundy nods. “Okay, so...uh, just follow us, okay? And if you’re in trouble, scream.”

“I can defend myself.”

“Wait, he has a Persona, doesn’t he?” Bad asks. “Our clothes changed when we summoned our Personas for the first time.”

Eret’s expression turns blank, and Dream explains the concept of the Persona. Eret attempts to summon his, closing his eyes, brows knitted, feet wide apart. A vague form takes shape from the blue glow beneath Eret’s feet, a muscular Persona with the letters RH tattooed across its chest in shining gold. It fades away all too soon, and Eret’s clothes change back into that of his uniform.

“Huh,” Eret looks back down at himself.

“Seems to me that it’s not stable yet,” Fundy says. “That just means you have to be extra vigilant and yell if you spot anything, okay?”

Dream strides forward, examining this new, darker world, where red stains the sky, the moon veiled by the drifting clouds. While the streets don’t look very different, aside from the depressing colour scheme and the streetlamps beaming circles of blue onto the asphalt, there’s just one thing that distracts Dream.

There are walking ATMs. ATMs with arms that swing and legs that propel them forward. Some of them are speaking to each other, clad in expensive accessories, but their words are garbled, sounding like the beeping and whirring of an actual machine. Others are merely standing by the sidewalk, quivering, sparks of electricity flying out from within their bodies.

The worst kinds, Dream realizes, are those who are lying on their sides, pleading and begging, incomprehensible babbling falling on deaf ears. They are definitely not up for conversation.

“This is how Kris views the people here,” Sapnap says, shaking his head.

“Walking ATMs. Their only purpose is to provide him money,” Fundy says. “If we steal his heart, then we can alleviate these people’s suffering. What better target can we ask for to prove our justice to society?”

“That’s right,” Dream says, turning back to his team. “We’re here to steal James Kris’ heart.” He stabs a finger at Eret. “And that includes you.”

“I will do my best,” Eret says.

“This is very...very motivational and all, and I wholly appreciate you for that, Dream,” Skeppy says, “but I’m not seeing a bank. We can’t steal our Treasure if we don’t have a Palace to steal from.”

Dream glances around. Skeppy’s right. There isn’t a single bank in sight. There are only drab, grey buildings as far as the eye can see, which is not very far, considering that these buildings are basically towering over them. The lack of light isn’t helping matters much either.

“Uh...guys?” Bad’s face is angled up to the sky, at the swirling mass of clo-

“What the hell...?” Dream is not quite certain what he is staring at. Maybe it’s an Unidentified Flying Object, a gold saucer spinning through the air, casting its brilliant shine down onto the mortal plane below. Dream rubs at his eyes. No, that fantastic UFO is still there, but it has, for some reason, stopped right above them.

“That,” Fundy says, having regained his composure the quickest, “is our Palace.”

“That’s a fucking floating bank,” Skeppy says.

“Language.”

The bank remains, stationary, above them, and Dream’s heart leaps to his mouth when an escalator slams into the ground, complete with moving handrails and elevating metal steps.

“It seems that this bank doesn’t come down for just anybody,” Eret says. “I’ve become one of Kris’ customers, so that’s why we’ve been allowed access to his bank.”

“Wow, so your blunder was some calculated move, huh?” Fundy asks.

Eret forces a smile. “In any case, it seems that you cannot infiltrate this Palace without my presence.”

Dream shrugs. “Fair enough.”

They ascend the elevator, moving up past apartment blocks, past large monitors showing nothing but static, past skyscrapers that reach even the bottom of the UFO bank. When they arrive, they are greeted by the exterior of a bank even gaudier and extravagantly-decorated than the dish of the UFO.

Dream walks past a rose garden on a mossy cobblestone path, ignoring the giant distasteful piggy bank statues placed walking right up to the bank’s oak doors and pushing it open cautiously.

Nothing truly stands out to him, other than the fact that he has entered what looks like an actual waiting area in an actual bank. There are Shadow receptionists, not cognitive beings, but real Shadows oozing black liquid from their masks and body, dealing with walking ATMs who are sobbing and shivering. A truly pitiful sight indeed.

“You must be Mr Kris’ new customers. Please, this way,” the Shadow receptionist who greets them says. “Please proceed through that door. It is advisable for you not to go anywhere else.”

“We’d better do as he says for now,” Bad says. “I really don’t wanna end up in an unwinnable fight.”

Dream nods. He treads towards the door indicated by the Shadow, finding himself in a long hallway that leads to several other rooms. There is a Shadow guard standing by a door, ushering them into the “registration” room.

Well, the place looks less like a reception room and more like a consultation room. A single table stands in the middle of the room with a briefcase on top of it. There is a monitor affixed to the wall at the far end of the room. A monitor large enough to take up the whole wall. The room is devoid of life, cognitive beings and Shadows alike.

Dream walks up to the briefcase on the table and clicks it open, instantly revealing bundled rolls of

cash bursting from the briefcase, falling to the ground, onto the table, everywhere. That is a whole lot of money.

“Can we just steal this and pay Kris back with it?” Nick asks, staring at all the dollar bills.

“That’s money in the Metaverse which, apparently, does not look like money we take from Shadows,” Bad points out. “So I doubt it’ll turn into legit money outside of the Palace.”

[“That’s](#) right,” a voice bellows from the speaker by the monitor. “That won’t be enough to pay back your debt, even if it was real money.”

The Thieves turn to the monitor that flickers to life, depicting James Kris’ sneer, or rather, that of his Shadow.

“You have no choice but to work for me, little brats. In the end, you’ll become nothing but walking corpses, people I can sell to make myself even more money,” Shadow Kris says, arms spread wide. “Or I could kill you guys right here and just waive that entire payment, huh?”

“Dying here is not an option,” Fundy says, drawing his sabre, even before Kris waves a hand and Shadows appear in the room. Kris sits back against his leather chair, watching them with a cocky smirk.

“Come on, Phantom Thieves! Entertain me!”

[The](#) Shadows lunge at them, transforming midway through the air. Two sword-wielding demons, red of skin and nimble, strike at them. Sapnap raises his cudgel just quickly enough to block one of their swings, while Skeppy stops the other with a wall of ice. The demons lash out wildly, shattering the ice and shoving Sapnap away, but Fundy and Bad are fast enough to loose a firestorm at them, burning the Rakshasas to a crisp.

A Shadow appears behind by the door, a demon carved from stone, that throws itself at them. Dream whips out his pistol and blasts a hole through its forehead, but the golem is still on the move, headbutting Dream against the wall, knocking the air out of his lungs.

Dream tears off his mask, summoning Matador, hurling the demon across the room with a flick of his wrist.

Another two Shadows rise from the vortex of black rippling by the monitor, and that is when Dream realizes that there is not going to be an end to this.

“We have to leave,” Dream says, and grabs Eret’s arm, Eret who was watching the whole fight unfolding before his very eyes. “Guys, they’re endless! We have to move!”

There is a clash of metal as Skeppy blocks another attack by the newly-summoned bipedal horse creature, sporting white spots and a shimmering mane, hurling fireballs at them. Bad counters with a fireball of his own, meeting the Orobas’ in the air and exploding.

Judging from the way the room is crumbling and trembling, it’s about to collapse any second now. Kris’ voice becomes panicky, screaming for more guards, *more guards! They’re escaping!*

Dream busts out into the hallway, dragging Eret behind him, only to realize that more guards have arrived, black ooze spilling from their masks.

“Hold on tight!” Dream reaches for his Pearl, hurling it past the guards. When he appears on the other end, behind the enemies, he shoots them once each, the guards bursting into ash immediately,

allowing safe passage for the others following behind.

They run out into the main reception hall, startling the cognitive ATMs, making a beeline for the exit, only to screech to a halt when he sees Shadow Kris standing there, a cigar in his mouth, flanked by two other Shadows. He's dressed in an expensive-looking suit, a sparkly pink coat worn over a silver vest and a tie, magenta pants flaring at the ankles, barely covering the those shiny stilettos on his feet.

["I see](#) you brats trying to escape," Shadow Kris says, tapping his cigar, ashes dropping to the ground. "Didn't think the famed Phantom Thieves are the type to do that."

"That's none of your business," Dream says. They're severely outnumbered, and not to mention that there're travelling with someone whose Persona is hardly stabilized.

"Oh?" Shadow Kris flicks his cigar to one of the Shadows. "I see you brought the useless one as well."

"The useless one?" Skeppy asks.

"The one who isn't here for a fancy masquerade," Shadow Kris says, gesturing at Eret. He smirks, baring teeth, at Eret. "You think you're so helpful, aren't you? Wanting to help the Phantom Thieves, wanting to be a part of them because you think they're just as unlikeable as you are. When you realized who the Phantom Thieves are, you saw your chance to prove your worth to them--"

"How did you fucking know all this?" Eret asks. His voice quivers ever so slightly.

"You're forgetting who I am, boy," Shadow Kris says, spreading his arms wide. "I'm the king of the underworld, the head of the Kris Family. I have eyes and ears everywhere."

"That's--" Dream starts, but Eret places a hand on his shoulder, stepping forward.

"You know what? That's right! That's all true," Eret shouts, and Dream has never seen him so shaken, never heard such raw rage burning in his words. "I just wanted someone to accept me for who I am. But that doesn't matter right now, because I'm not gonna let them die to scum like you!"

"Whoa." Nick whistles.

[Dream](#) leaps back just as a pillar of blue flame circles around Eret.

Are you tired of the stares, the whispered rumours? Aren't you tired of the expectations, the weight of their aspirations on your back?

Shadows begin to gather, appearing from blobs of darkness in the walls, taking their demonic form as soon as they land on the ground. Dream shoots a High Pixie down with his pistol, the bullet nailing it in the stomach.

Maybe it's time to shatter those projections. Maybe it's time to listen to your heart. Defy those who demand everything from you yet give you nothing in return.

Eret screams, the blue flames growing even larger and larger, licking at the ceiling of the bank. His Persona's form solidifies, till Clay can see now that it is a knight in white and gold, slivers of red running down its sides. It clutches a bow and arrow in its hands, decorated in intricate carvings.

I am thou, thou art I. Release the wild beast that slumbers within your soul and let it run amok!

Eret's mask appears on his face once more, his clothes changing from his uniform back to his khaki clothing. He grabs the edge of his mask and rips it off.

"Robin Hood!"

[His](#) Persona fires one single arrow at the door to the bank and it pierces the wall of the building, sending debris flying everywhere.

"Run!" Dream shouts, fending off the Orobas and starts sprinting towards the hole in the wall. The rest of the Thieves wrap up their battles as well, heading for their escape route that Eret has blasted.

"Hop on!" Fundy shouts, jumping and turning into the Fundybus. Everyone climbs in and Dream steps on the accelerator.

"Wait! Wait a minute! There's no road!" Bad shouts.

"We're gonna die!" Skeppy shrieks.

The Fundybus soars into the sky, away from the grabby hands of the Shadows. Dream's stomach drops as the Fundybus begins to plummet towards the streets below.

*

Phil, Godfather Detective

Chapter Summary

eret has officially joined the team

Chapter Notes

yes he has robin hood. what that means im gonna leave it up to ur interpretation :). oh, right and the awakening speech that robin hood made is one i wrote it myself since, well, in the game robin hood doesn't actually get an awakening speech

also i have absolutely no idea what to name this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

6/19 – FRIDAY – EVENING

“Every time we leave the Palace, are we going to have to do that?”

Clay is busy bandaging his arm, the bandage clenched between his teeth as he attempts to cut it with scissors. Nick has a plaster stuck over his forehead, which looks sort of goofy if Clay thinks about it.

“Probably,” Clay says, sighing.

After they flew out of the Palace, Bad had activated the Meta-Nav, which then led to them falling a couple of inches from the sky, landing in the middle of a crowded pavement. Clay isn’t sure if anyone saw them appearing from nowhere, but hey, at least they got away with merely a few scrapes and bruises.

“Still, that was crazy, huh?” Nick says, shaking his head.

“Yeah. I never thought we’d have to infiltrate a floating bank or anything,” Floris says.

“Palaces come in all shapes and sizes,” Clay says. “Anyway, it’s almost time for the VC.”

Clay boots up his laptop, setting it on the dining table. Nick moves to keep the first-aid kit and he and Floris gathers around Clay.

“Hello!” Zak calls, waving at the screen. Darryl is walking over with two white mugs in the background.

“Yo,” Nick holds up a hand. “Eret’s late.”

“He’s still got five minutes. Cut him some slack and don’t be mean,” Darryl says, settling down next to Zak.

Just as he finishes that sentence, Eret's screen pops up next to theirs – he appears to be in his own room, which is messier than Clay thought it would be.

[“Hey Eret.”](#)

“Hello. Do the Phantom Thieves do this all the time? It's a little...unsecure, isn't it?”

“Unsecure?”

“What if this call is traced?” Eret asks. “Not to mention your message logs and the Meta-Nav. Your activities could be attacked at any moment and we'd be none the wiser.”

“Huh, I...never thought of that,” Darryl says, resting his head on his palm. “Still, none of us has any expertise on any hacking stuff and all so...”

“Hmm, neither do I,” Eret mumbles.

“Okay, we can talk about all that later,” Floris says. “For now, we should focus on how we're going to go about infiltrating the Palace.”

“The escalator should be lowered,” Darryl says. “Since Eret is a confirmed customer of Kris'. So we don't need to worry about getting up there.”

“But is there a better way of getting down?” Zak asks. “I got, like, bruises and I swear I dislocated my shoulders.”

“Only one, and I popped it back in for you.”

“But it hurt-!”

“Guys,” Floris cries, and the two fall silent. Eret muffles his laughter with his hand.

“What's so funny, Mr president?” Nick mutters.

“I just...I did not expect the famed Phantom Thieves to be so...rowdy,” Eret says. “But do continue.”

“Okay, so first of all, we need a codename for Eret,” Floris says.

“You mean the alternate names you call each other in the Metaverse?”

“Ooh, he catches on quick,” Zak muses.

“In that case, I'd like to continue using Eret,” Eret says. “I don't use my real name outside of that world, so privacy isn't an issue if we're worried about the effects of using my name in the Metaverse.”

“I think that's fine,” Clay says. “It's not his real name, so it should be all good, right?”

“Eh, it'll work, I think,” Floris says. “It's decided. Eret's codename will just be...Eret. Now, on to more important matters. Eret, to inaugurate you into the Phantom Thieves, we're going to have to explain to you our method of operation.”

“We usually meet up on Mondays and Fridays, though we can do so on Wednesdays and Saturdays soon,” Clay says. “So, uh, we're going to have to go get weapons for you, so we're going to need you to meet me on, uh, Sunday, okay?”

Eret nods. “Can do. However, I have Council meetings on Mondays, so I don’t think-“

“That’s fine,” Darryl says. “So we can meet up on Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays. That’s still plenty of time.”

“Okay, so our hideout is at the accessway at the Valentine Hills station,” Nick says. “When we say we wanna meet up at the hideout, that’s where we’ll be.”

“The accessway. Got it.”

“So how this goes is that we’re going to first infiltrate the bank and find the Treasure – that would be to secure our infiltration route. Then we send the calling card,” Clay explains. “The calling card would change the cognition of the target, to make them think that their desires is something that can be stolen.”

“That would make the Treasure take shape in the cognitive world,” Floris finishes. “Got that?”

“Yeah.”

“We have three weeks before the money is due, and from this afternoon’s experience, this guy isn’t playing around,” Darryl says. “I think this is our most dangerous target to date.”

“Exactly, so I kinda wanna steal the Treasure as soon as possible,” Floris says. “We should go in this coming Monday and at least try to make it as far as we possibly can in the Palace.”

“I understand,” Eret says.

“So our game plan is settled for now. After getting Eret weapons on Sunday, we’ll enter on Monday,” Floris says. “Is everyone okay with this?”

There is a chorus of agreements, then Clay leaves the call. Nick has already migrated to the couch, putting on some zombie movie. Floris hops off his lap and struts up the stairs by Clay’s heels as Clay settles into bed.

When Clay’s head hits the pillow, he’s asleep in an instant.

*

6/20 – SATURDAY – EVENING

“So, today was your last day of your job?”

Yao Yi is sipping her clam chowder, she and Clay sitting at a diner at a corner in Bowarrow Street, a new place mainly selling soup that just opened up and has received critical acclaim, a few stations from Valentine Hills.

“Yeah,” Clay says. Their beef stroganoff is really good, actually.

“That’s great,” Yao Yi says, eyes on her phone screen. “Oh, wait. I’ve got a new job for you.” She holds out her phone. “There’s this actor who’s really popular and stuff. I want you to take care of him.”

“Wait, what?” The Phan-Site isn’t staring up at him. Rather, Clay is staring at a newspaper article.

“He’s a popular actor! He’s *got* to be involved in a scandal or other,” Yao Yi says. “Anyway, he’s probably bad.”

“Cheng, I don’t think...” Clay sighs. “I don’t think this can be a potential target.”

“Why not?” Yao Yi wonders, puffing her cheeks out as she takes her phone back. “Think about it, if you go for targets like these, you’d be famous in no time! The entirety of the state will know your name!”

“Even so, there isn’t concrete evidence that this guy is doing something shady,” Clay says. “He’s not-“

“Hey, that’s Cheng!”

[A group](#) of girls walk up to them, led by a tall blonde dressed in the Enderlands High uniform, sporting a rose-coloured crop top and blue, ripped jeans. Her cheeks are constantly moving as she chews gum nonstop.

“Who’s Cheng?” one of the girls cackles.

“Oh, I dunno.” Another titters. “She’s just so forgettable.”

“Now, now girls. You shouldn’t say that stuff in front of her boyfriend,” the girl at the front of the group, Crop Top, says, and her entire posse laughs. Yao Yi visibly shrinks back against her seat, playing with her hair.

“If you girls are done,” Clay says, gesturing towards the door, “please leave.”

“Oh, you’re a cute one,” Crop Top croons, placing a hand on Clay’s shoulder, and Clay shrugs her off forcefully. “And feisty too. I like that in a man. I’m sure you can do better than Che-”

“Babe, let’s go,” Clay says, rising and pushing his way past the girls. “Sorry, but you’ll have to look for someone else to bother.”

Clay takes Yao Yi’s hand, twining their fingers together, and pulling her out of the store. He lets go once they’re outside, but doesn’t stop walking till they’ve reached the entrance to the train station.

[“Who](#) were those people? God, they were so annoying.”

There is a prominent flush on Yao Yi’s cheeks, and Clay prays with all his heart that he did *not* just ignite some kind of passion within her. He’d hate to turn someone down, and he has *George*.

“She’s, um, she was from my middle school,” Yao Yi says. “That was Beth, the leader. And Natalie and Prisha. I don’t think they have anything personal against me. You know that person who is the butt of all the class’ jokes? Yeah, that was me.” She laughs bitterly. “My nickname was Zero, okay. I was nothing commendable, nothing above a zero.”

She then looks up at him, fire in her eyes. “But I’m no longer a zero. I’m the image manager for the Phantom Thieves! I’ll help change the world...” She lets out a breath and clenches her fists. “No, I *will* change it. It’ll be me. All me.”

Clay shoots her a worried look, unable to stop thinking about her diction, the way she said those words. However, at least he can see where she’s coming from...They take different trains at the Elytra Interchange, and Clay heads home, the carriage rumbling down the tracks through the tunnel.

6/21 – SUNDAY – DAYTIME

Clay is in the back room, assembling a revolver for Eret, when he hears the jingle of the bell. He glances at the clock. Eret's not due to come for another hour, so that can't be him. Clay peeks out the door, only to find a rude boy in a raglan shirt standing at the entrance.

"Yo, Big P," Tommy saunters in.

"Decided to come to work?" Phil looks unfazed, continuing to read his documents.

"Well, no, because green man is supposed to be taking my shift," Tommy says. "I came to see how you're doing, Big P."

"Well. I'm doing well," Phil says absently. He flips a page.

"What's that you're reading?"

"Case files."

"Oh." There is a pause. "Well, you don't really come to see me and Wilbur anymore."

"That's because he's your tutor and it's strange for me to be sitting in during your tutoring sessions," Phil says.

"But you always joined us for coffee afterwards," Tommy says. "Well, maybe a juice for me, but same thing. Wilbur's old and he's getting boring."

"Tommy, I'm busy," Phil says. "Some other time, alright?"

Tommy doesn't reply for the longest time, then he mumbles, so quietly that Clay could hardly hear him. "I'll...just get going now, then."

Phil hums, and the bell chimes once more. Clay finishes assembling the revolver and polishes it with the cleaning cloth, till it is positively sparkling. Another glance at the clock informs him that Eret is going to be reaching soon, and that his shift is ending.

"You doing alright back there?" Phil asks, walking into the room.

"Yeah." Clay holds up the revolver. Phil nods approvingly.

"What was that about?" Clay asks. "You know Wilbur?"

"*You* know Wilbur? Well, you probably do, given that you know Tommy," Phil says, scratching his chin.

"He's actually my tutor too."

Phil's eyes widen for a fraction of a second. "Now that's surprising. You seem like a smart guy." He shrugs. "Tommy is...I'm his godfather. I was close to his parents, you see, but, well...they're dead."

"I'm sorry..."

"It's...It's fine," Phil says. "Tommy's parents...I'm actually investigating their deaths right now. They were police officers, pursuing a gang. They were killed when Tommy was still a child, and Tommy was taken by members of the gang. I've only gotten into contact with him a couple of

years ago.”

“Is it the Kris Family?”

“I’m not sure,” Phil says. “I had investigated them, but I haven’t found concrete evidence to prove that they were the ones behind the hit job. Not to mention I haven’t found out anything about the identities of their murderers.”

The door opens, and Clay turns to find Eret striding in, dressed in a hoodie and slacks, unlike what Clay’d expect him to wear.

Eret greets Phil with a wave, then walks over to Clay, who hands him the revolver.

“This looks fancy. Thanks.” Clay tosses a pair of bronze knuckles at Eret, who catches them expertly.

“Thirty bucks,” Phil says. “So that’s basically your pay.”

Clay holds a hand up in thanks and heads out the store, the paper bag in Eret’s hand.

[“Don’t let](#) anyone see you with that, alright?” Clay says. “Absolutely no one.”

“Naturally.”

“Remember: the Palace run is tomorrow.”

“I know that.”

Clay can just imagine Floris’ potential snarky reaction right now, which he would make, if not for the fact that he is at home, probably lazing about doing whatever foxes do on a Sunday.

“Well then, I suppose I’ll see you tomorrow,” Eret says. He walks with Clay till the train station, the entire time keeping silent. That is, until they reach the platform.

“I was wondering if you could do me a favour,” Eret says, a little bashfully. “I was wondering if you’d be able to...well...show me around.”

“Show you around? Me?”

“Well, as the Student Council president, I think I ought to know what the average student thinks,” Eret says, then pauses. “Wait, no, I don’t mean that I’m *better* than other people, but just-“

Clay laughs. Eret’s rather funny when he’s caught so off guard. “I get it.”

“Yeah? In return, I can analyse the Shadows somewhat. Guess their weaknesses, their strengths, that sort of thing. My Persona gives me some sort of power to do that.”

“Really now?” Clay nods. “In that case, we have ourselves a deal.” Eret grasps his hand, and shakes it.

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast acquired a new vow. It shall become the wings of rebellion that breaketh thy chains of captivity. With the birth of the Emperor Persona, I have obtained the winds of blessing that shall lead to freedom and new power...

Clay’s train pulls up to the platform first, and he waves goodbye to Eret.

Chapter End Notes

Charm +3 (working at convenience store)

Moon arcana rank 3 -> 4

Hierophant rank 2 -> 3

Proficiency +3 (working at Untouchable)

Emperor arcana rank 0 -> 1

Bank of Gluttony: Infiltration Begin

Chapter Summary

elevator struggles

Chapter Notes

finally we start infiltration of kris' palace

i had a nightmare where i finished the bank infiltration in 1 day and had literally nothing to do for rest of the time till July 9

Quite short chap today tho kaneshiro's bank is quite repetitive (finding a code and doing math like 5 times man + the security cameras part pisses me off every time i go thru that)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

6/21 – SUNDAY – EVENING

“Oi,” Clay says, tugging at Nick’s sheets. Nick tries to roll onto his side, further cocooning himself in his blanket. “Dinner.”

“Food,” Nick rises like a zombie, blinking his bleary eyes. “I smell food. Good food. Did mom order takeout today?”

“Well...no,” Clay says. “I think you’d like it, though.”

“Oh, really?” Nick sounds sceptical. He yawns. “I’ll come downstairs soon. Just gimme a moment.”

[Nick](#) arrives at the table a moment later, still a little woozy from the nap, but the expression on his face is priceless when he realizes exactly what he’s looking at. Three plates of rice with adobo and a leaf of lettuce each. Mrs Armstrong is already sitting at the table, a little nervous, watching Nick’s reaction expectantly.

“You made this?” Nick seems unable to comprehend this turn of events. “We haven’t eaten this for...for...I don’t know how long!”

“I heard you liked it,” Mrs Armstrong says with a clearing of her throat.

“Yeah, I do,” Nick says, pulling out the chair and settling down. “Thank you.”

Clay can almost see the twitch of Mrs Armstrong’s lips, the way her face lights up is more than enough for him. Dinner is a lively affair tonight, conversations shifting to school, to life in general, with most of it taking place between Mrs Armstrong and Nick.

“Thank you, Clay,” Mrs Armstrong says, as Clay helps in washing up. “I think Nick and I...just needed some time to understand each other, and that dinner was precisely the way to do that.”

“You’re welcome,” Clay says, drying a dish.

“Don’t stay up too late, alright? You have school tomorrow,” Mrs Armstrong says, and Clay can feel the bond between them deepening just a little more...

*

6/22 - MONDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

“At least they have the decency to fix this up,” Bad says.

The Thieves are staring up at the entrance to the bank, which is completely boarded up. Well, they’re not going to enter this way without drawing huge amounts of attention to themselves.

“We’re going to have to look for another way in,” Dream says. No Phantom Thief just goes through the front door anyway.

Walking around the bank yields no results, since the building has close to no windows, and all they’re seeing is a continuous blank wall. Well, if there’s no choice...

“Wait,” Eret says, walking over to one of those giant piggy bank statues flanking the path running through the garden. He circles the statue, inspecting it, then pressing his palm flat against the pig’s snout. The snout slides in easily, and the statue begins to tremble. It glides to the side, revealing a secret passageway that tunnels through the earth.

“It’ll probably lead somewhere important, considering that he bothered to hide it,” Fundy says, scampering through it first. The rest of the Thieves follow him, until they end up below a staircase, wriggling through the circular hole in the floor of the bank. When everyone’s through, Dream places the manhole cover back on.

“Okay, so Dream, choose your fighters,” Fundy says.

“Choose my fighters?”

“Our team’s getting way too big,” Fundy says. “We won’t be able to stay out of sight if all of us go together, so we’re gonna have a main infiltration team and a backup team. The main infiltration team will be our frontline forces, so that includes you, our leader” – Fundy gestures to Clay – “and three other members. The rest will be backup. The backup members are no less important; you guys need to make sure that no Shadow sneaks up on us from behind.”

“In that case, I’d like Fundy, Bad and Eret with me.”

“So we’ll just beat up anyone else who’s trying to be sneaky, right?” Sapnap says.

Skeppy throws an arm around Sapnap’s shoulders. “Just you and me, pal. Just you and me.”

“Alright, now that that’s settled, let’s go!” Fundy begins to run off past the staircase, with Dream, Bad and Eret right behind him.

The hallway is deserted and leads right up to the reception hall. It is quiet and does not look like security has increased in level. There are Shadow guards standing by the entrance, but they do not seem particularly strong; perhaps they are as weak as the High Pixies that Dream got rid of the

other day. They bypass the guard Shadows, darting behind pillars and benches, ignored completely by the nonresponsive ATMs, shaking and crackling with electricity, wailing and utterly oblivious to reality.

Dream and the others make it to the other end of the reception hall, busting into a tiled hallway flanked by office cubicles. Dream bets everything he has that there some Shadow is going to walk out of the office and-

“Wait, is that-?” Fundy scurries over to one of the cubicles and presses his back flat against it. The hallway opens up to a lift lobby, potted plants placed beside the elevator buttons. A Shadow dressed in a formal blouse and skirt stride into the elevator’s open doors, which then slide shut, iron bars sliding over the doors. The numbers above it begins to blink and glow, indicating the movement of the elevator.

“There’s something important downstairs,” Bad says.

“Seems that way,” Dream says, approaching the elevator. There is a cardkey reader above the buttons, the panel glowing a deep green. “Now, we don’t have a cardkey...”

“We can steal one,” Eret says. Dream nods. Eret’s becoming well-assimilated into the Phantom Thieves now, daring to suggest something that screams “Thief!” like *stealing*. “One of the employees ought to have it.”

“But I don’t want to raise a commotion here,” Fundy says, glancing around. “Let’s find some guy all alone somewhere...”

“Security!”

Dream spins on his heels, mouth agape as a female Shadow bursts into black ooze to form a group of High Pixie, their blue wings fluttering like hummingbirds, zephyrs dancing by their fingertips. Dream looses a bullet, striking one of the High Pixies in the belly and she scatters into a cloud of dust.

Fundy shoves Dream away, just in time for the dead High Pixie’s blade of wind to shoot by his face, nicking his cheek and drawing blood. Eret finishes off the final High Pixie with his revolver. Dream grits his teeth when he notices the surge of Shadows piling out from the cubicles, running in from the main reception hall.

Sapnap and Skeppy are holding off some of them, with Skeppy erecting that useful ice wall and keeping most of the Shadows at bay.

“Let’s go, now!” Dream begins running up the staircase beside the elevator, the rest of the Thieves following suit. The gigantic ice wall Skeppy formed shatters, clinking like pieces of glass. Dream races up the stairs, reaching the second floor. There are Shadows here too, transforming the moment they see them.

“In here!” Eret rams a door open with his shoulder, revealing nothing but an office with one lone Shadow within. Fundy slices its neck with his sabre and the Shadow’s scream cut off midway as it dissolves into ash. Sapnap slams the door shut and Skeppy encases it in ice. The banging on the piece of plywood about to give way soon does nothing to help soothe Dream’s nerves. There’s got to be something they can do! *Anything* in this room can help them right now!

Think, *think*! As if on cue, the room goes dark, a blue square of light fizzling at the corner of his vision. Dream turns his head and finds an air vent, coated in sparkling blue light. It’s tight, but big

enough to fit all of them...he hopes.

Dream pulls at the vent covering, the metal grate falling to the ground with a soft thump courtesy of the carpet. He then squashes himself through the opening, crawling on his hands and knees, vent clanking with each move he makes. As soon as the last Thief is through the vent, Dream hears the clank of the grate and the Shadows screaming overhead.

"Where did they go? Find them!"

Dream's heart can hardly calm down, thumping against his ribcage, his stomach doing flips. His fists are clenched tight.

As soon as the Shadows' voices fade, the door clicking shut, Dream lets out a long sigh of relief.

["That was..."](#)intense," Eret says, breathless.

"I'm kinda used to it by now," Sapnap mumbles. "Also, can we start moving? I really don't wanna be staring at Skeppy's butt the whole time."

"Dude, stop," Skeppy says. "Stop being creepy. This piece of ass is reserved for one person and one person only, okay."

"Yeah, go get the 'D', Skeppy," Dream mutters. He screeches when a ball of fire whizzes past his head, singeing his hair. "Dude! What the actual fuck-!"

"You said something that was very rude. Also, language!"

"You just got roasted," Fundy snickers. "Literally."

Dream continues to crawl through the vent, the Thieves bickering behind him. He makes it to the end of the vent, which leads, apparently, into an empty room. A room with wires and cables extending upwards to the...oh. They're not in a room so low that they can hardly stand straight.

"We're on the elevator," Eret says.

"You mean on top of it," Fundy says, and then squeaks, because the elevator car begins to move downwards. It descends, the wires and cables creaking as it sends the passenger towards the basement level. After about five seconds, it jerks to a stop, and Dream spots a tiny opening in the side of the wall. With a little wiggle, he manages to fit through it – it's about the same size as the one they just crawled through, and Skeppy gets in just before the elevator begins to move again.

"I almost lost a limb."

"As they say," Bad says, "break a leg, Skeppy."

"I'm so glad I'm not back there," Sapnap mumbles. "Poor Eret has to deal with their flirting."

"You call that flirting?" Fundy sounds disgusted. Dream snorts.

This vent leads them to an entirely new area. Dream drops down into an office room and offs the one Shadow within with a shot to the forehead. He walks by the scattered ashes and heads over to the door. No Shadow in sight. Good.

There is a safe room just across, and Dream slips through it. The room flickers back and forth between a club's back room, smelling strongly of alcohol, and the bank's lounge.

[“Let’s rest](#) for a few,” Fundy says, hopping on the couch.

Everyone takes off their masks and weapons, laying them on the table in the middle of the room. Dream strolls over to Eret, who is staring out a tiny window, granting them a view of the surreal sight below, populated by nothing but malfunctioning ATMs and dilapidated buildings.

“So, uh, is Robin Hood a lot more stable now?”

“Huh? Yeah,” Eret says, scratching his head. “At least I think it is. I summon it with no problem now.”

“And your clothes aren’t changing back.”

“Yeah. That’s a good thing, isn’t it?” Eret says, arms folded. “Cl-I mean, Dream. This is the stuff you go through when stealing hearts?”

“Pretty much.”

“I didn’t know you had to put your lives at risk. Against the Shadows of people’s minds,” Eret says.

“You can say that again.” Dream reaches over and unlatches the clasp, opening the window. The wind whips at his hair, blustering into the room. Since the bank isn’t moving, they could potentially drop a Pearl down and escape the Palace that way. Getting back here would be a pain, though.

“Alright,” Dream says, clapping his hands at the team. “Ready to go?”

“Yeah, sure,” Skeppy says, rising. “Come on! We got a Treasure to steal!”

*

Chapter End Notes

Proficiency +3 (cooking)
Empress arcana rank 3 -> 4

Bank of Gluttony: Infiltration Middle

Chapter Summary

infiltration middle - security cameras are the bane of our existences when we're committing a heist

Chapter Notes

kaneshiro's bank is soooooo shoooooort because its so repetitive! literally have to divide the elevator and the security camera part into 2 parts man

i was so dissatisfied with the prev chap that i had to release another one

i'd just like to say that i love this palace theme

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

6/22 - MONDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

“No! No, no, no! Get away from me!” Bad shrieks. A Yaksini leaps at him, blades slashing wildly. Bad throws out both palms and releases a giant fireball, consuming the Yaksini in one pillar of flame.

Eret neutralizes his threat as well, the arrow of light searing through the air and piercing the Black Ooze, its remnants spilling out onto the ground in amorphous blobs, crumbling to dust.

[They](#) have run past several hallways as they moved downwards through the bank’s basement, took care of many weaker Shadows and avoided the stronger ones. Now this corridor looks slightly different from the rest for some reason that Dream cannot put his finger on...

“Watch out!” Eret shouts, grabbing Dream’s hand and pulling him backwards. Dream stumbles, wondering what’s gotten Eret so worked up.

“Security cameras,” Eret says, pointing up at what appears to indeed be a security camera, shaped almost like a gatling gun, beaming greenish light down to the ground. No doubt that getting caught on one of that would raise the Palace’s security level.

Dream presses himself flush against the wall and inches along it, just narrowly avoiding the glare of the camera. When he’s past that one, he lets out a breath, glancing at the ceiling only to realize that the entire hallway is littered with them.

Well, what he also does see is a stairway at the end of the hallway. A stairway with a Shadow just walking up and...

[The Shadow](#) screams, bursting into a dark shape that morphs into her demonic form, a blonde woman in a flowing plum-coloured dress that sends a wave of pink and purple. A sharp pain assaults Dream’s head and he stuffs his fingers into his ears, trying to block out as much of the

waves as possible.

An arrow whizzes by him, slicing his arm and lodging itself in the wall next to him. The arrow explodes, taking the chunk of concrete and security cameras with it. A piece of hard metal connects with Dream's face and his head snaps to the side, pain blossoming on his cheek.

Dream blocks the next punch with his dagger, blade screeching as it meets metal. Dream finds himself staring up into Eret's eyes, unfocused, a hint of pink swirling between his irises, expression dull. Dream doesn't have time to think, because the next thing he knows, Eret's fist digs into his stomach and Dream hacks and coughs as the air is forced from his lungs.

"Snap the hell outta it!" Dream headbutts Eret as hard as he can, forcing Eret to stumble back. Robin Hood flickers behind Eret, nocking an arrow onto the bow, aimed at Dream.

Dream summons Principality and deflects the arrow, the projectile zipping through the air and stabbing the Shadow behind Fundy, killing it instantly. With a wave of his hand, Principality disappears and is replaced by Clotho, scattering a shower of holy water around the battlefield.

The light returns to Eret's eyes. He blinks.

"What the hell?"

"Oh good, you're finally back," Bad shouts. "A little help here!"

Eret whips around and throws out a hand, Robin Hood obeying his command and loosing an arrow at the Leanan Sidhe, the arrow sailing through her and finishing her off. The Leanan Sidhe poses no more threat, but that was a dangerous ability it possessed, brainwashing his friends like that.

"Sorry, I-"

"It's fine. Happens all the time," Dream says, sheathing his dagger. "You good? Head hurting or anything?"

Eret's eyes widen by a fraction, then smiles. "Yeah, I'm okay."

"I hope we don't see anymore of those," Bad says, sighing.

"Alright, no dilly-dallying," Fundy says. The only way forward is past those stairs, and with the security cameras destroyed, Dream and the others fear nothing as they descend to the level below.

*

The Thieves enter a great hall, staircases leading them down further into the bank. There is a corridor at the other end of the hall, two strong Shadows visible through the glass door. Fortunately, their backs are turned, giving the Thieves the opportunity to sneak down the stairs. Their voices travel far, but Dream is unable to make out what they are saying.

It's not possible to go nearer the two Shadows, given that there are security cameras in the way.

"What's this?"

Skeppy is staring at a box, its border sporting the colours of a bee, black-and-yellow, a red button encased with a glass panel. With one swift kick, Skeppy shatters the glass, broken bits and pieces raining to the carpet below.

"Why'd you touch that?" Sappnap hisses, grabbing him by the collar and yanking him back. "What

if it was trapped?”

“Well, it wasn’t,” Skeppy sticks his tongue out at him.

“Should we press it?” Bad asks.

“If any Shadow comes running we can just fight them off or escape back into the safe room,” Dream says, reaching over and giving the button a little push. The button sinks into the wall and immediately, there is a beep overhead. Glancing back at the hallway, Dream sees that the security cameras guarding the path up to the two Shadow guard have switched off.

“If we see anymore of those buttons, we just gotta press it, then,” Fundy says, already heading up to the room where the two Shadows are gathered and the Phantom Thieves listen in from right outside the door.

“You know that door? That leads to Kris’ personal bank?”

“Yeah?”

“You didn’t lose your cardkey, right?”

“No? ...It’s still with me, safe and sound.”

“Great. Don’t lose it whatever you do, or we’re toast!” The Shadows’ voice become quieter and quieter, until they are totally inaudible.

“Okay, so they have the cardkeys. To Kris’ personal bank,” Bad says.

“The Treasure’s probably there,” Fundy says. “We’re going to have to seize those cardkeys.”

“And we spotted a few places that may need cardkeys, didn’t we?” Dream says, folding his arms.

“But dude, they looked kinda strong,” Sapnap says. “We can’t just go rushing in. We’ll lose our heads.”

“Why not we just separate them?” Eret suggests. “We can split into two groups of three and take them on at the same time.”

“And how’re going to do that? The whole lure them away thing?” Skeppy asks.

Eret lowers his gaze. “I’ve got no idea.”

“Disabling the cameras opened up those hallways. I think we should go on ahead and check it out first. Who knows, we might see the two Shadows along the way,” Fundy says, already making his way towards one of the hallways. Dream and company follows after him.

There are surprisingly no Shadows around, but there sure are a lot of empty offices. Dream chances upon a room that looks slightly different from the rest, fitted with many monitors, a control panel at the far end and a microphone attached to it.

“This is...” Eret pushes past Dream. “Isn’t this a communications room? Or a command room?”

“Yeah?” Sapnap raises a brow.

“Can’t we use these pieces of equipment to lure one of the Shadows here, then take it on when it’s alone?” Eret asks, observing the security camera feed through the monitors.

A couple of monitors to the side are merely blank, display wiped out, instead of showing grainy videos of empty hallways. There is one monitor in particular showing a guard room, the two Shadows from earlier sitting inside and chatting over a box of donuts and cups of coffee.

“Sounds like a plan,” Dream says. “Then one team should wait here, and the other should go find the other Shadow. Eret, I’m putting you in charge of the team here.”

“Me?”

“Prove yourself,” Dream says, a hand on Eret’s shoulder. “Sapnap and Skeppy, you’re coming with me.”

“Right,” Sapnap says, his cudgel resting on his shoulders as he follows Dream out the door.

Dream finds an empty office, peeking out from the door, making sure not to be seen. All of a sudden, the speakers in the ceiling crackle to life, and Eret’s voice booms loud and clear, resonating in the hallways.

“This is an emergency! The intruders have infiltrated the communications room! I repeat, this is an emergency! May we request backup? Just one person will do!”

Dream sighs. Did he make a mistake when placing Eret in charge? No one’s gonna- The thundering of footsteps against the carpet alerts Dream, and he retreats behind the door, heart jumping like crazy.

[“W-What?”](#) I’ve been had!” the guard Shadow shrieks, and the unmistakable sound of transformation gives Dream the cue. The Shadow had come from that direction, past those offices, so the other guard Shadow should be...

Dream finds the guard room at the end of a twisting hallway, the label above the door stating its function ever so helpfully. Dream throws the door open, and the Shadow inside drops his donut onto his cup, the cup toppling over on its side and spilling coffee all over the ground.

“W-What? Who are you?” the guard Shadow cries, leaping to its feet. “Did you trick us?”

“We didn’t even use a voice changer and you can’t even tell we’re intruders? Pathetic,” Sapnap says, taking a threatening step forward.

[“You bastards!”](#) the Shadow morphs into its true form, a spotted demon wielding a jagged sword, horns protruding from its skull. Its misty eyes focuses on Dream, and it pounces. Oh, and does it move so *fast*.

It makes for Sapnap first who manages to block its attack with his cudgel. Skeppy jumps from the table, sending keyboards and monitors scattering to the floor in a tangled heap of wires, his katana raised above his head.

Just as Skeppy brings his blade down, the Shadow throws up a hand, an icicle piercing like lightning through the ground, slicing at Skeppy’s face. Skeppy’s mask flies off his face the same moment Dream fires a bullet that shatters the icicle. Skeppy leaps back, a long red line dripping blood running across his nose, but at least his blade manages to cut through the Shadow’s shoulder, leaving a gaping wound behind.

Sapnap forces the Shadow backwards, summoning Captain Kidd and blasting a beam of electricity, which the Shadow seems to shrug off without any trouble. Dream summons Shiisaa, the Frei sphere knocking the Shadow off its feet. It sprawls forward, sword still clutched in its hands, but

when it raises its head, the Shadow finds itself staring at the muzzles of three firearms.

“This is the end of the line for you,” Dream says. In the next moment, the Shadow’s body is riddled with bullets, the three of them blasting till their barrels are empty, but by then, the Shadow has already been eliminated. Utterly.

One solid item that lands amongst the pile of ashes is what appears to be a cardkey, their ticket into Kris’ personal vault. Dream brushes off a strip of ash that clings to the card and pockets it.

[“Why](#) didn’t you group me with Bad?” Skeppy whines.

“Dude, that’s kinda gay,” Sapnap says.

“That’s ‘cause I’m totally gay for him.”

“He said that you didn’t like him, though. Not in that way,” Dream whispers, sticking his head out of the guard room and peering left and right. No Shadows.

“That’s because I wanted to play hard-to-get,” Skeppy says. They head the same way back, through the winding corridor.

“You’re already hard to want,” Sapnap snickers.

“You’re mean!”

There is a lack of noise coming from the command room, and that can mean either one of two things. What gives Dream some hope is the fact that the other Shadow isn’t prowling around the hallways right now.

Dream pokes his head in, only to find Eret, Fundy and Bad well and alive. Eret and Fundy are bent over the screen on the control panel, while Bad welcomes them back. The Shadow is nowhere to be seen, and the second cardkey is clutched in Fundy’s tiny paws.

“I see you managed to do it,” Dream says, walking over to where Eret is studying some kind of map. It’s a map of the bank!

“According to this map, there is a pathway just past the aforementioned vault doors linked to the main reception lobby,” Eret says. “I’ve managed to deactivate the security cameras there, so we can activate the door, go past it, and then go back down to the reception hall to leave the Palace.”

Eret rolls the map up and hands it to Dream, who stuffs it into his coat.

“Everyone’s tired,” Bad says. “I think this is a good place to stop.”

Dream has to agree. He, himself, is running on fumes. The Thieves leave the command room, setting out for the door of Kris’ personal vault, just one level down from where they come from. Flanking the door are two cardkey scanners. Sapnap and Bad each take one, tapping the cards against the scanners.

The scanners glow green, then red, then green again; all the while, Dream has his hands stuffed into his coat pockets, praying with all his heart that this would work...

Then, the indication light above the door blinks green, and the door opens. Dream restrains himself from yelling “Yes!” at the top of his lungs. He receives the cardkeys from both Sapnap and Bad. With a beckoning gesture, he rushes through the door, managing to find an unlocked emergency

exit door, the sign above it fizzling and flashing.

The door opens up to a staircase that leads them upwards, spiralling up for what feels like an eternity. Thankfully, their journey upwards is uneventful, and they reach the topmost landing, a locked door standing in their way. Dream taps one of the cardkeys against the scanner and the door beeps, opening automatically.

The main reception hall has just a couple more Shadows than before, but Dream finds themselves standing at the top of the staircase that they had entered from. Their infiltration point is just under their feet!

Without incident, they crawl back through the vent, emerging right in front of that giant piggy bank, and Dream sighs in relief.

“I think I can fall asleep standing up,” Bad says.

“Hey, there’s an escalator going down,” Sapnap says. “Was this here before?”

“Maybe,” Dream says, scratching his head. Oh well. What’s done’s done, right?

“We were panicking,” Skeppy says. “Driving a minivan off a UFO was the most rational thing we could have done in that situation.”

“So, no offense, Fundy, I would like to take the escalator this time,” Bad says. “It may take a little longer but at least I won’t have to fear breaking an arm.”

“Me too,” Fundy says, nodding. “Me too.”

Returning to the real world. Thank you for your hard work.

*

Chapter End Notes

the two guard shadows fought if anyone's interested -> sui-ki (by dream, skeppy and sapnap) and fuu-ki (eret, bad, fundy)

why i split the teams that way is because dream doesn't exactly trust eret not to die so he assigned him both his healers (only bad and fundy have healing personas if we don't count dream) so he took sapnap and skeppy with them since they're better at offense and dream has healing persona. and i feel sapnap and skeppy would act more out of impulse and bad and fundy think things through more (ok maybe fundy not so much but still) so they'll work better with eret

Pain of the Heart

Chapter Summary

some s link stuff

Chapter Notes

so dream's just spending time with s links lol to recover from that harrowing palace experience

and also cos idw to do the palace in one day

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

6/22 - MONDAY - EVENING

<Phoenix SC> I haven't seen you in forever

<Dream> sorry i was busy

<Phoenix SC> it's fine. thought you left the game for good tbh

Dream slices at a skeleton, picking up the arrows it dropped when it dies.

<Dream> we made a promise, didn't we?

<Phoenix SC> yeah

<Phoenix SC> also do you know what girls like?

<Phoenix SC> my daughter's birthday is coming up and I'd like to get her something

Get his daughter something? What do girls usually like? Well, he knows Ruby likes crepes and Yao Yi likes, uh, the Phantom Thieves...and maybe volleyball on the side. Niki likes gardening...

<Dream> not sure. the girls I know like different things

<Dream> why don't you ask your daughter?

<Phoenix SC> I tried

<Phoenix SC> her mother won't let me talk to her

<Dream> her mother?

<Phoenix SC> she lives on the other side of the city, and this week my daughter is staying over at her place

<Dream> she can't even use her phone?

<Phoenix SC> tried. shes uncontactable

Maybe her mother checks her phone. Or she took it away from her.

<Phoenix SC> that being said she doesn't usually talk to me when she stays with me either

<Phoenix SC> oh well I shouldn't be burdening you with all this

<Phoenix SC> maybe it's time I repent for being a failure as a father

<Dream> maybe you should get her chocolates. Or a stuffed toy. Girls usually like those things

<Phoenix SC> I see. Thanks

<Phoenix SC> right, so for today, we're going to learn how to craft...

When Clay logs off that day, he can't help but feel that he and Phoenix SC grew just that bit closer...

*

6/23 – TUESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

"I've been getting many students coming in recently," Dr Montgomery says as she pours two cups of what smells like roselle tea. "People with relationship problems, people coming in because of SATs stress...I hope I've helped them in some way."

"I'm sure you have."

A smile flickers across Dr Montgomery's face as she walks over to where Clay is seated and places their cups on the coffee table.

"I've managed to make some headway in my research, but unfortunately, I've reached another roadblock as soon as I did," Dr Montgomery says. She is seated facing Clay on her armchair, Clay munching on a Snickers bar.

"There are many kinds of pain, usually pain that you feel physically, and pain that you feel in your heart," Dr Montgomery says, sipping her cup of tea. "People often dismiss pain that they cannot see, and I feel that that is a failing of our society."

Clay nods, drinking from his cup.

"Yet, when we are unable to see and feel the pain for ourselves, it is hard to understand it fully and to determine what exactly is the best way to go about helping them," Dr Montgomery continues, "and this is where I'd like your help, Clay."

"I hope I can." Clay unwraps a biscuit and tosses it in Floris' direction. Floris snaps it up between his jaws and chomps down on it. At this point, Floris is just eating anything and everything that are not vegetables. Dr Montgomery seems chill about Floris, despite there being a rule that one should not bring animals to school.

"I'm sure you can," Dr Montgomery says, smiling. "Clay, I would like to know under what circumstances you would feel hurt. Like, not physically, but to hurt in your heart."

Clay bites his lip. This is a hard one. “When someone I’m close to betrays me.”

Dr Montgomery nods. “I can see what you mean.” She laughs. “Something like ‘heartbreak’, isn’t it? When someone cheats on you.”

Clay shrugs. “Yeah, something like that.”

“Well, what if that happened to you, Clay? If someone you loved betrayed you in the worst way possible?”

“I would feel really hurt,” Clay says. He’s only dated one girl back in middle school, just because everyone else was doing it, but they broke it off amicably. “Because I trusted them, and they just... took my trust and shattered it like that.”

“I see, I see. It only takes one moment of betrayal for intense trust to turn into intense pain,” Dr Montgomery says. She drains the last of her tea and places the empty cup back onto its saucer.

“Yeah.” Clay finishes drinking his tea as well. The cup meets the table with a clink. Dr Montgomery is scribbling something down on her clipboard. Clay snags another biscuit and feeds Floris with it.

“Thank you, Clay,” Dr Montgomery says. “You’ve been a big help. Wounds of the heart are hard to detect but when they are experienced, they may be the biggest source of pain in someone’s life, temporary or permanent.”

“No problem.”

“Well then, I promised you that I would teach you a couple of relaxation techniques, right?”

Clay leaves the counselling room that day, mind feeling somewhat refreshed.

*

6/23 – TUESDAY – EVENING

“How’s school?”

Clay looks up from where he’s arranging the automatic rifles on the rack. “Pretty good.”

“You make a lot of friends?”

They’ve been pulled together due to unexpected circumstances, but well, they’re still friends. “Yeah.”

“I see.” Phil nods. He plods over to the coffeemaker. “Want coffee?”

“Sure. With cream. Lots of it.”

Phil laughs. Not long after, a steaming cup of coffee is placed on the counter, its strong aroma wafting around the store. Phil sits back down on his chair, legs once more kicked up onto the counter as he indulges in his favourite magazine.

“Not doing anything illegal, are you?” Phil asks. “Your school project going well?”

School project? What school project? “I’m a good, upstanding citizen.”

Phil chuckles knowingly. “Of course you are.”

The door opens, and Clay gapes. The man who’s just walked in, dressed in that weird school uniform, is none other than Blade, a briefcase in hand.

“Oh, Blade. What brings you here?”

Blade seems to notice Clay standing by the counter, drinking his coffee. “I came to pass you your files. Scott got fired.”

[“Fired?”](#) Phil stands, straightening his shoulders. “What do you mean?”

Blade shrugs and holds out a manila folder. “He told me to pass this to you. Didn’t exactly want to see you right now.”

Phil looks down at the folder that Blade is waving at him. His fingers clench around it, and Blade releases his grip. That document, no matter how thin it looks, appears so heavy in Phil’s hands, like he’s trying to lift a boulder.

“I’m going to leave now,” Blade says.

Blade turns and exits the store without another word. Phil sinks back against his seat, the innocent file crumpled in his hands. Clay has no idea what to say or what to do to someone who is so completely crushed.

“Phil...”

“Clay, I think you should leave now,” Phil says, voice wavering. He reaches into the drawer and pulls out thirty dollars. The full payment despite Clay only being here for half the time. “I’ll...I’ll handle the store.”

There is that note of finality in Phil’s voice, urging him to go. Clay presses his lips together, contemplating. He thanks Phil for the money and proceeds to down the rest of his coffee. He washes the cup in the backroom and places it back in the cupboard. He picks his things up and leaves from the back door.

“You look down.”

Clay glances to his feet to find Floris standing there, having come back from his walk. “What happened?”

“Well...something happened with Phil, so he told me to leave first,” Clay says. “I’ll tell you back at home, okay?”

Floris jumps into Clay’s bag and the two set off back to Jule Halls.

*

[6/24 – WEDNESDAY – MORNING](#)

“In literature, there exists characters who are viewed by society as criminals but are not necessarily as corrupt as one may think,” Mr Gregson says. “One such criminal leads a band of Merry Men, who steals from the rich to give to the poor. Does anyone know who this character is?”

Clay can *feel* Mr Gregson drilling holes into him. Because, well, maybe Clay has a penchant for staring out the window during lessons and Mr Gregson doesn’t like slackers.

“What about you, Mr Clay?”

Called it.

“Uh...” Clay knows this guy, the one who “steals from the rich to give to the poor”, as Mr Gregson puts it.

“Eret’s Persona,” Floris hisses.

“Robin Hood?”

“I’m impressed you knew that,” Mr Gregson says. Clay sits back down with a sigh of relief and continues to stare out the window.

*

6/24 – WEDNESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“Ah, Clay.”

Clay is just heading out of the school when he sees Smith heading down the same corridor, his laptop bag in hand.

“Smith.”

“If you’re not busy, may I ask you for a favour?”

A favour? What could that be? The Thieves aren’t meeting up today anyway, so Clay nods.

“Sure.”

Smith’s face lights up. “Cool! I need you help testing something that I’ve been coding.”

Clay follows Smith all the way to the other campus, one meant for club activities. Is Smith trying to get him to join his hacking club or something? Clay has, admittedly, zero experience with computers and all that sort.

Smith pulls open the door to a dusty room in the middle of the corridor, beside the computer labs. The room looks like one would expect of a classroom, just that the tables and chairs are fancier and there is a giant VR headset on the table, hooked up to some machines, wires coiled on the ground like tiny rubber snakes.

“Here, put this on.” Smith hands Clay the headset, which Clay attempts to strap onto his head. The headset fits nice and cosy, but it weighs down on his nose a little and, well, all he can see is black.

“Okay, hold on for a moment,” Smith says. “I almost got it...ah, there we go.”

The world around Clay begins to fill with colour, and objects begin to appear in front of his very eyes. Objects that look so real, like something that Clay can literally just reach out and touch...

“Here’s the headphones,” Smith says, voice muffled after a pair of fluffballs slide around his ears. Relaxing music plays in the background, as Clay stares out into a wide open pl-wait a minute, is this Mimecraft?

“Can you hear me? Is the audio working?” Smith asks, voice floating through the headphones.

“Yeah, I can hear you.”

“Okay good,” Smith says. Right then, Smith appears in front of him, waving at him. “Can you see me?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, okay. That’s great.” There is a rustling sound, and something is inserted into Clay’s hand. From the feel of it, it’s a game controller. For a VR set. “Try waving.”

Clay does.

“Okay, it works. You can remove the headset now.” Clay takes off the headphones, handing it to Smith, and releases the strap of the headset. He sets it on the desk next to him.

“That was great,” Smith says. “Thanks for helping.”

“Is it for a competition?”

“Nah,” Smith says. “It’s actually for my brother.”

“Your brother?”

“Yeah, my twin brother, Toby,” Smith says. “He started this project but can’t carry on anymore, so I’m trying to finish it.”

“What happened to him?”

“Huh?” Smith fiddles with the headset. “Oh, it was, uh, an accident. When we were on a trip. Yeah. So, uh, anyway, thanks for coming. I think I’ll make some improvements and stuff so I might need your help again.”

“Sure. Just ring me up when you do.”

Smith flashes him a smile, and waves to him as Clay leaves the room, sliding the door shut behind him.

*

6/24 – WEDNESDAY – EVENING

“So, uh, you called me out to a jazz club?”

Blade hums in response. Not very talkative, it seems. “This place is nice.”

Not exactly Clay’s cup of tea, but whatever. At least Blade is willing to invite him to a jazz club, which is open to minors, and pay for his drink and entrance fee. He must make a lot of money as a detective.

Clay takes a sip of his drink, and almost spits it out in disgust. He swallows it, though, through sheer will.

Blade must have noticed, because Clay sees the hint of a smirk on his face. “Don’t like it?” he asks, almost challengingly.

Clay shakes his head. “No. I’m cringing from how delicious it is.”

“Really?”

The singer wraps up her performance and thanks everyone for listening, when the next singer and an accompanying saxophonist heads up to the raised platform. Clay has to choke down the rest of the drink, under Blade's scrutinizing gaze, might he add. No way is he going to lose to this guy.

"What do you think of the Phantom Thieves?" Blade asks.

Clay knew the subject was going to switch to this eventually. Granted, he and Blade didn't exactly exchange many words when they met up.

"They've made quite an impact on society."

"It seems that way."

Silence reigns between them. Well, this is awkward.

"I mean, they're cool. I'm totally a fan," Clay says. "Those people who confessed can no longer hurt anyone else anymore."

"But now people are going to live in fear," Blade says, stirring his drink with his straw. "These Phantom Thieves could target anyone and make them confess against their will."

"The Phantom Thieves will only choose criminals. Those who have flouted the law."

"Hmm, sounds exactly like what a die-hard fan would say," Blade says, continuing to sip his beverage. "Since we don't know how they do what they do, it would be difficult to arrest them, but I will not rest until I've managed to catch the Phantom Thieves." He blinks, almost like he's been in a trance. "Sorry, lost myself a bit there."

"No, it's fine. That was passionate."

"That's how it's like in the force," Blade says, shrugging. The two of them finish up their drinks and stand to leave. Blade grabs his briefcase, the stylish grey briefcase of his that probably costs a ton. Since Blade lives around the area, Clay and Blade go their separate ways once they leave the club.

"At least we know they're not on to us," Floris says. "We're still pretty safe."

"Yeah," Clay says. He spots a Krispy Kreme store. "I'm hungry. Want some donuts?"

Floris' whiskers twitch. "Cookies and cream. Oh, or the plain sugar one."

"That's so basic."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Clay laughs, reaches into his wallet to order and pay for the donuts.

*

Chapter End Notes

Hermit arcana rank 2 -> 3 (Phoenix SC)
Proficiency +2 (crafting with Phoenix SC)

Councillor arcana rank 1 -> 2 (Montgomery)
Proficiency +3 (working at the gun shop)
Hierophant arcana rank 3 -> 4 (Philza)
Knowledge +2 (answering question correctly)
Faith arcana rank 1 -> 2 (Tubbo)
Priestess arcana rank 1 -> 2 (Techno)

Fun fact: i don't like coffee

I'm My Own Person

Chapter Summary

more s links i guess?

Chapter Notes

i was fucking cringing while writing that last dreamnotfound scene im no good at writing romance lmao

im suddenly a little scared i cant actually finish the s links legitimately and will try to cram everything at the very end

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

6/25 - THURSDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

“You will go home with me now, young lady! No more hanging out with that stupid boy!”

“Mom! Let me go!”

Clay quickens his steps, throwing the door open and finding Niki resisting an older woman in a floral dress. A swing of the woman’s arm sends pots smashing to the ground, soil and flowers and leaves scattering everywhere. Niki looks up at the intrusion, her face flushed, tears in her eyes as she struggles to yank her arm away.

The woman snarls at him. “Is he Derek?”

“No, mom! He’s just a club member! Stop it!” Niki shouts, wrenching her arm away from her mother’s grip, who can only glance between Niki and Clay. Her shoulders heave. She walks right up to Clay and stabs a finger at him.

“You better stay away from my daughter because she doesn’t need to be hanging out with trash like you-“

“Mom!” Niki half-screams.

Clay holds up his hand. “With all due respect, you should let go of Niki; you’re hurting her.”

“She’s my daughter! I can do whatever I want with her!”

“She’s still her own person. Not your property,” Clay says firmly.

“I could report you to the principal right now,” Niki’s mother says. “Who are they going to listen to? Me, an adult? Or just some schoolboy-“

Clay resists the urge to bite back a retort.

“That’s enough, Mom,” Niki begs. She moves to stand between her mother and Clay. “I’ll go home with you, but please don’t report him.”

Clay cannot express how much he wants to wipe that smug smirk off her face. Niki flashes him an apologetic smile and follows her mother out of the room, heading quickly down the hallway.

[“That was](#) intense,” Floris says. “What are you gonna do about it?”

“Talk to Niki, maybe, next week,” Clay says. He walks into the science lab, every piece of wall, every piece of shelf or floor covered with plant pots and flowerbeds, some housing blossoming flowers, others green, leafy stems or fruits of vivid colours. All these, maintained by Niki’s own hand.

Clay places his bag to the side and walks over to the spot where the flower pots have overturned. He’s going to need a broom and dustpan for this. He retrieves one from the janitor’s closet not far from there, and gets to work.

*

[6/25 – THURSDAY – EVENING](#)

“Hey.”

Clay’s hand shoots up to grab the bottle of 100-Plus that Nick tosses at him. He takes a long swig from it, its refreshing taste perking him right up. Another bottle drops from the vending machine, clattering onto the metal tray. Nick grabs it and gulps it down.

“You guys are all sweaty. Ew,” Floris sticks his snout into the air, swiping at paw at them. “Get away from me.”

“Floris, you stick your butt into my nose, like, every single morning.”

“I was sleeping!” Floris cries, mortification in his tone. “That wasn’t something I can control!”

“Maybe we should get him a bed,” Nick says thoughtfully. “Like, a dog bed or something.”

Clay settles down on the bench, Nick taking a seat beside him. Floris sprawls out over Clay and Nick’s laps.

“Oh, yeah, I haven’t thanked you yet,” Nick says with a grin. “For what you did with my mom.”

“What I did with her?”

“As in, at least she’s not yelling about Neil now,” Nick says. “And she’s talking to me not like some kind of Neil clone. She’s talking to me like I’m me.”

“Well, that’s good.”

“Yeah, it is,” Nick says, nodding. “I really appreciate you doing that, and, uh, your presence in general. You know that, right?”

“Nick, I hate to break it to you but I only have one boy in my heart right now-“ Clay snaps his mouth shut. Wait a minute. Nick doesn’t know yet, does he? Only Floris. Floris bursts out in laughter, rolling about, tail slapping the bench.

“Is it George?”

“What the fuck? How did you-“

“Darryl told me,” Nick says. Clay wants to stab Darryl all of a sudden. “More like, he confirmed it. You were making googly eyes at him when we first met him, remember?”

“I was *not* making googly eyes at him.”

“You were too! Just admit it,” Nick chortles, punching Clay’s arm. Ow. With all that training they were doing in the Metaverse, Nick’s muscles aren’t for show. “So, uh, we’re getting side-tracked. Honestly, I just want to thank you for being here. Just...being here.”

“Same here,” Clay says. The sun is still high in the sky, the clouds impeding the rays their only reprieve from its blaze. He shoos Floris off his lap and stands, finishing up his 100-Plus and disposing of it into the nearby trash bin.

“It’s almost six,” Clay says. “Let’s grab a burrito for dinner.”

“Oh, burritos. Haven’t had those in forever,” Nick says.

“Burritos? What’s that?” Floris asks, treading alongside Clay and Nick as they head down the road for home.

*

6/26 – FRIDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“Temperature’s okay, blood pressure’s normal. Great. This’ll really help a lot,” Joel says. “If you’re not feeling dizzy, if your head’s feeling right, then we can call it a day here.”

Is it just Clay or is Joel a little thinner than the last time he saw him? Did his hairline recede a bit?

Clay downs a cup of water and hurls it in the bin. Out of all the trials he’s participated in, he drank the least suspicious liquid today, but the taste seriously needs some fine-tuning. He’s expected it to taste bitter, or maybe sweet, but *sour*?

Joel winces, and Clay’s gaze snaps to him, a hand on his head.

“What’s wrong?” Clay asks.

“Just...tired,” Joel says. “It’s nothing to concern yourself over.” He attempts to rise, only to stumble and crash back into his chair.

“That’s more than just ‘tired’,” Clay says. “I think you should rest for today.” And for many other days after that.

“I’m fine,” Joel grits out. “I have to complete this medicine or Lizzie...Lizzie will...”

“If you’re tired, you’re going to make mistakes, and the medicine may just hurt Lizzie even more,” Clay says.

Joel eyes him for a couple of seconds. He sighs and leans back against his chair. “I...you’re right. I think I’ll stop here for today.” Clay helps him stand, the man wobbly on his feet, but is able to close up the clinic and head outside.

“Mister!”

Clay turns towards the shrill voice, the exclamation of a young girl who runs over to Joel and hugs his legs. Joel almost falls over, but he squats down to pat at the girl's head.

"You're doing better already," Joel says.

"I am!" the girl cries. Clay is certain he saw her before. Is she the girl with that lung disease? Alison, was it?

An older man strolls towards them, his hands in his pockets. "Alison, don't bother the doctor now."

"It's fine," Joel says with a small smile, hand still on Alison's head, ruffling her hair. "I'm glad Alison's doing well."

"All thanks to you, doctor."

"Without her optimism, she wouldn't recovered as fast as she did," Joel says. "I'm merely the catalyst."

"Don't write yourself off like that," Alison's father says with a hearty laugh. "You've been helping so many people in this community, even those who couldn't afford those expensive hospitals."

Joel hums, but Clay can tell he's pretty happy with the comment. At her father's call, Alison runs back to his side. The duo takes off, saying something about having to go grocery shopping, leaving Joel and Clay standing outside the clinic.

"They're grateful to you," Clay says.

Joel chuckles. "Never did I think I would end up providing medical aid to so many people. I just needed, like, a den to brew drugs."

"Den to brew drugs," Clay repeats, hardly holding back his laughter.

Joel grins, and Clay feels that they've grown that little bit closer...

*

[6/26 - FRIDAY - EVENING](#)

"Oh my God. There's *no way* I can finish this."

George is staring at the burger mountain in front of him, stacked high to the skies with patty, lettuce, tomato, onions, pickles and who knows what else?

"You said you wanted to try the Big Bang Burger challenge," Clay says.

"Yeah, but...I wasn't expecting it to be so...so *big*." Clay laughs at the obvious despair on George's face. "Clay, I'm *not* going to be able to finish this."

"That's why I didn't order anything for myself," Clay says. "Go on, eat it."

George opens his mouth to take the first bite, then stops, looking over at Clay. "Are you watching me eat?"

"Self-conscious?"

“Well, yeah.”

Clay grabs a few fries from George’s basket and begins to chew on one. “See, I’m eating too.”

George laughs, and Clay still can’t get over how nice it sounds.

As for the challenge, George made a valiant attempt, though he gave up way earlier than Clay did, the half-eaten burger lying on a bed of wrappers.

“You got halfway.”

“My stomach is about to burst,” George whines, leaning back against the backrest of the chair and pushes the burger at Clay. “Have you ever finished the challenge?”

“Nope. Never.” Clay takes out six dollars and slides it over to George, before taking the burger into his hands and making quick work of it.

“I should get a kiddy meal to go,” George muses. “I need to buy dinner home for Gina.”

“Maybe you should bring her along next time,” Clay says.

George shakes his head. “Gina doesn’t leave the house.”

“Not even for school?”

“No. She does online learning. Not to brag, but she’s doing college-level courses now,” George says. “Also, she’s really adverse to meeting strangers, especially boys.”

“Why?”

“Because, well...our father was a bastard,” George says. “I don’t mean, like, a legitimate bastard, but he was a shitty person.”

“What happened?”

“He screwed our mother over,” George says bitterly, choosing to gaze into his swirling cup of Coke. “She had us, and he left her. Then our mother committed suicide.”

“Then the rumours...”

“They’re obviously more exaggeration than anything,” George says, shrugging. “Honestly, I’m not too bothered by it.”

“That’s good.”

There is silence for a while. Clay reaches for the last fry the same time George does, their fingers brushing, and Clay immediately withdraws his hand. George peers up at him curiously, takes the fry and stuffs it into his mouth.

“Are you alright? Your face is red.”

Clay is never washing his hand again. “No, I’m not-I’m totally fine. You’re-You’re imagining things.” On the seat beside him, his bag shifts, and Clay wants to glare at Floris who is so evidently laughing right now.

“Oh, right,” George says, sipping his drink. “What’re your plans for July fourth?”

Clay is stunned for a moment. With all the things that have been happening, he's totally forgotten about it. July fourth.

"There's going to be a carnival at Valentine Hills that day. Wanna go together? You can bring your friends too."

"You mean Nick?"

"And everyone else," George says, shrugging. "The other two boys you're always with."

"Can I come too?" Floris cries, breaking free from the constraints of the bag. "I mean, after we steal the Treasure, of course?"

Oh. That's right. The Treasure. "Can the fox come?"

George nods. "Sure. Can't guarantee that there will be fox-friendly food, though."

"I eat anything." Floris beams proudly. "Except veggies. Those suck."

"He's fine with anything. Especially veggies," Clay says. "I have an herbivorous fox."

"Oi!"

George chuckles. "Sometimes, it feels like you're actually talking to your fox. Can I hold him, by the way?"

Floris looks absolutely too eager about this. Clay has half a mind to just hurl him at George, but George doesn't deserve such uncouth treatment, so Clay settles for just handing him over their table.

Clay watches as George scratches Floris behind the ears, resting his cheek against his palm, heart soaring. George just looks way too cute in that sweater, holding Floris like a child and just...being too cute for his own good.

Is this what being in love feels like?

*

Chapter End Notes

Kindness +5 (gardening)
Chariot arcana rank 7 -> 8 (Sapnap)
Guts +2 (shady clinical trial)
Temperance arcana rank 5 -> 6 (smallishbeans)
Magician arcana rank 2 -> 3 (george)

Dream's current social stats:
Guts -> Staunch
Knowledge -> Learned
Kindness -> Considerate

Charm -> Suave

Proficiency -> Skilled

Bank of Gluttony: Infiltration Core

Chapter Summary

of (more) security cameras and mazes

Chapter Notes

i managed to get my brother into the dream smp war im proud of myself hahahaha

6/27 - SATURDAY - DAYTIME

Dollar bills flutter from above, coins dropping like pebbles past them, clanging on the floor below. Dream's boots meet crinkled notes, scrunching them up as he dashes down that long hallway. Fundy, Sapnap and Eret are following close this time, with Bad and Skeppy taking up the rear.

When Dream reaches the end of the hallway, it turns, showing him the way to an entire line of cubicles, guard Shadows patrolling the length of it. Moreover, there are security cameras that blink on and off at regular intervals.

"Well, what's the plan?" Sapnap asks.

"We're going to have to bypass both the Shadows and the security cameras without getting caught," Dream says. "Or we can take them out."

"If you can snipe it," Bad says. "We don't want them calling for backup."

"It's narrow," Fundy says, eyes on the hallway. "I don't think we can all fit at once."

"Then we'll go in two groups of three," Dream says. "Or pairs."

They end up going in twos: Dream with Eret, Sapnap with Fundy and Bad with Skeppy. Dream darts behind a cupboard, Eret right behind him. The footsteps of the Shadow are getting louder and louder...

In a flash, Eret fires a bullet that smashes into the Shadow's face, shattering its mask and rendering it defenceless. Dream finishes it off with a stab of his dagger. Black ooze splatters onto his mask, onto the blade, covering his body with ash as the Shadow lets out an ear-piercing shriek.

Dream drops to the ground, narrowly avoiding the beam of light from the security camera that just switched on again. He can see the other Shadow from the periphery of his vision, its back turned to them, none the wiser as to what just happened to its buddy.

Come on, turn off already! The blue beam is still very obviously splashed on the ground, in a perfectly circular puddle. Dream *could* slowly inch backwards, but he doesn't trust himself not to make some kind of stupid mistake.

“Dream,” Eret hisses.

The Shadow has reached the end of the corridor, and it’s now turning around...

A shot rings out through the area just as the camera’s beam turns off, the bullet sailing through the air and lodging itself in the back of the Shadow’s head. The Shadow gives a shriek and it bursts into ash. Dream hurls himself backwards, falling against Eret and shoving the both of them against the wall with an “Oof!”

Dream glances back at his teammates to see Sapnap placing his gun back into its holster.

That Shadow aside, the hallway is clear now. Dream beckons for the rest of the team to follow him, running ahead when the cameras are inactive, and keeping themselves hidden in the shadows when those blue beams of light blink on.

Dream and Eret are the first to make it to the other end of the hallway, followed by Sapnap and Fundy, then Skeppy and Bad. There is a door at the end of the new hallway.

“It’s locked,” Dream says, jiggling the knob. He glances around. There isn’t any other way forward. Is there another path they can take? Would something glow blue once again at this opportune moment, like how it had when they couldn’t find a way forward the last few times?

A small blue square begins to glow out of the corner of Dream’s eye. He turns, fixing the spot in the middle of his vision. The blue disappears, and Dream finds himself staring at another vent that leads out of the bank, but it travels parallel to the hallway that they are locked out of.

“Let’s go,” Dream says, prying the vent open – it was already loose – and Dream crawls through easily and is met with a gust of blustering wind, whipping his hair about. Thankfully, his mask keeps the dust out of his eyes, and Dream does not need to look down to know just how high they are in the sky. One wrong move and they’re plummeting to their deaths.

The ledge they emerge upon runs along the upside-down dome of the UFO bank, the disc high above their heads. Despite the bank being stationary, the wind is as strong as ever, blowing them against the edge of the dome, making it hard to move.

As they traverse the ledge, Dream hoping with all his heart that he didn’t just lead them to a dead end, the wind begins to change direction.

“Oh SHIT!”

Dream hears it a tad too late, spinning around and seeing Sapnap losing his footing and taking a tumble from the ledge. Arms outstretched, mouth open in a surprised “O”. Too fast for Dream to comprehend...

Eret leaps from the ledge, diving through the sea of clouds. He grabs Sapnap’s arm the same moment something long and thin shoots from his wrist, a slender length of wire hurtling through the air.

Skeppy grabs the grappling hook, Bad holding him by the waist, and the wire pulls taut.

“Fuck!” Skeppy hurls forward, the weight of two teenage boys too heavy for the two of them to handle. Dream and Fundy chip in as well, holding Skeppy in place on the ledge, just inches from the edge, while Eret carefully rescinds the wire, pulling them up slowly but surely.

“Holy shit.” Sapnap leans against the wall of the bank, a knee pulled up to his chest. “My heart

just...I think I died for a moment there.”

“If not for Eret, you’d be dead,” Bad says.

Sapnap looks up at Eret. “Thanks, man. I mean it.”

“It’s no problem.” An amused smile flits across Eret’s face.

In no time at all, they’re on the move again, being especially careful to keep their backs against the wall of the bank, that is, until Dream spots another vent, this one missing its cover but *god* does it smell awful. It is a tighter fit than the other one, but with a bit of wriggling, Dream worms his way into the vent.

Navigation through the vent takes a bit of effort and teamwork, since most of the twisting and turning paths lead to dead ends, or vent grates affixed so securely that they are impossible to remove. When Dream manages to slam his fist against a grate and loosen it, he hoists himself up through the vent and finds himself standing in a giant lobby, flanked by two staircases gleaming in the bright lights from above.

Ahead, there is an elevator, which would likely take them down to the deepest parts of the bank.

At the same time, there appears to be an unfortunate obstacle in the way.

[“Kris,”](#) Fundy draws his sabre.

“Uh, uh. I don’t think you wanna do that here,” Shadow Kris says, spreading his arms out. “I’m only here to give you a warm welcome, my dear Thieves.”

“Nothing about you or this place is even remotely warm or welcoming,” Dream says. “Where is the Treasure, Kris?”

“As if I’d tell you!” Kris cackles. “Man, you guys are on another level of stupid. Waltzing into my bank like you own the place.” He stomps the floor, and Shadows rise up around the Thieves. Dream takes a step back.

The Shadows waste no time in bursting into their demonic forms. High Pixie, Orobas, Leanan Sidhe, Orthrus, Rakshasa, and another ominous being decked out in gold armour.

[“Get them!”](#)

Dream shoots the High Pixie rushing him, then turns his attention to the Orthrus that lunges at him, a beam of ice completely pulverizing the canine demon. He aims his pistol at Shadow Kris and fires.

The golden demon swiftly steps in front of him, the bullet ricocheting off its tough armour, lodging itself into the wall. Dream does a backflip, narrowly dodging the wave of pink from a Leanan Sidhe. The next thing he knows the Leanan Sidhe goes up in flames, screaming her lungs out, the fireball a stray projectile from Bad’s attempt to incinerate the golden demon.

“Dream! Duck!”

Dream drops to the ground, an Orthrus and Yaksini leaping at each other, right above his head, which would have been him if he hadn’t just squatted. A shimmering arrow pierces through both their skulls and they burst into dust, the cloud of ash sprayed up into Dream’s face as the arrow whizzes through the air.

Dream coughs, tearing up as he swipes the ash from his eyes.

Sapnap grabs him by his arm and pulls him to his feet. By now, the only Shadow standing is that golden demon – even Shadow Kris has fled to who-knows-where - whose armour has not even sustained a scratch. How are they going to fight something like this?

“It’s immune to our weapons,” Eret says. “We’re going to have to use our Personas to finish it off.”

The Shadow roars and pounces, arms swinging rapidly. Dream conjures Setanta, barely managing to parry its swing. Fundy scampers behind it, Zorro flaring to life behind him, sending twin cyclones in the Shadow’s direction.

“Fundy, behind you!”

A lightning bolt strikes at Fundy, shocking him with at least a few thousand volts before he even has a chance to turn around. Bad dashes forward, Carmen summoned, green wisps swirling around his fingertips.

Dream has no time to worry about that, though. The Shadow lashes out, bolts of electricity crackling from its body, zipping through the ground in sharp zigzags, shooting up from beneath their feet. Dream summons Principality. They’ve got to take it out right here, right now.

“Oi, Dream!” Sapnap’s back hits Dream’s. The Shadow roars again, preparing its next wave of attacks. Captain Kidd flashes above Sapnap, cannon aimed at the Shadow. As soon as the cannon fires, Principality sends a wave of light, charging the cannonball up, transforming it into what appears to be a ball of glass.

It smashes into the Shadow’s face, knocking it back with so much force that it is sent crashing into the wall, concrete cracking behind it. The cannonball shatters and the Shadow leaps to its feet, ready to continue its assault. That is, if it is not on the other end of five people wielding Personas, spheres of fire, arrows of light, spears of icicles at the ready.

“I think,” Dream says, bending down till he and the Shadow are eye to eye, “it’s time for you to disappear.”

The Shadow opens its mouth to respond, only for Dream to take a step back. Setanta raises its javelin, and the Shadow is bombarded with attacks from all directions. No moment of rest, just magic after magic after magic. Skeppy gets the final hit in, the spear of ice stabbing the Shadow through its chest, slipping past its golden armour, and the Shadow screams, bursting into a million strips of ash.

[Dream](#) glances around, noticing Fundy still leaning against the wall, completely knocked out. Bad is tending to him, healing him his wounds with a pool of green. Fundy stirs, paws trembling, tail swishing just a little bit.

“Oh fuck this,” Fundy mutters. “How the hell was I supposed to know it was going to...to throw electricity at me? That thing doesn’t even look like it had an ounce of magic in it!”

[“Well,”](#) Dream says, rubbing the back of his neck. “You know what I think? I think we should form pairs. You know, like have a buddy.”

“Meaning?”

“Like, have someone to cover you when you’re fighting, you know. So if we ever get careless, at least we have someone to watch your back.”

“Sounds good,” Eret says. “The fewer injuries we have, the longer we can keep on going.”

“I wanna be with Bad!” Skeppy grabs Bad’s wrist. Bad pulls his scarf up (to hide his growing blush?)

“Then Sapnap, you’ll be with Fundy, since you can cover his weakness and vice versa, and I’ll team up with Eret. Everyone okay with that?”

There is a chorus of “yeah”s and “yes”s, before the Thieves decide to continue forward, keeping a lookout for safe rooms on the way. Dream understands – his muscles are aching and sore. For the good of the team, it’s imperative that they be at their best, lest a lapse of judgement cost their team greatly.

Where Shadow Kris had been standing in front of is an elevator that, surprisingly, does not require a cardkey. Dream presses the call button and the elevator’s doors open, allowing the six of them to squeeze into the tiny capsule.

“Oi, Eret. Move!” Sapnap yelps as he nearly impales himself on Eret’s spiked bangles.

“Ah, sorry.”

“Skeppy, your katana.”

“I can’t control how long and thick my fucking sword is.”

“Language!”

“Shut up! You have tainted my ears!” Fundy cries.

“Oh my God.” Dream rubs at his temples. It’s so packed that he’s actually feeling a little claustrophobic.

The elevator door closes. It jerks once, then begins to descend. It goes down, down, down. Descending for so long that Dream nearly forgets that he’s stuck in an elevator with four other boys and a fox, smelling like sweat and musk.

“Look!”

The elevator passes a certain point, where one of the walls is now formed from glass panes. The floor that they are headed to is circular, made up of concentric circular walls. No, they’re not just walls. They’re vaults. Bank vaults.

“This must be Shadow Kris’ personal vault,” Fundy says.

“You mean this is the amount of money he’s taken from people? And I thought Marion was messed up,” Sapnap says.

Eret hums, staring down at the vault, deep in thought.

The elevator halts abruptly, the doors opening, greeting them with a blast of cold air.

“I sense a safe room,” Eret says, glancing towards their left. Sure enough, Dream sees the wavering door, a distortion in space. [The room](#) is nothing more than a break room, flickering between the cognitive world and reality. Vandalised walls turning into lockers, broken desks represented by respectable couches and a coffee table.

“Hey, we’re at the very bottom of the bank,” Sapnap says, looking out the window, and there’s an emergency ladder here.”

“Then we can get down from here and come back up the next time we infiltrate,” Eret says.

“Can I be real with you guys? I’m pooped,” Skeppy says, flopping down onto the couch, body so limp he looks like jelly.

“Get your fucking long and thick sword away from me,” Sapnap says, kicking at Skeppy’s katana. The katana clatters to the ground, and Sapnap plops down on the space beside Skeppy, only to shriek and jump at least six feet into the air. Skeppy whistles. Dream wheezes when he sees the plate of ice covering the spot that Sapnap is about to sit on.

“What the actual fuck, you fucking li-“

“Language!” Bad sends a tiny fireball in Sapnap’s direction, singeing his hair, the fireball nearly hitting Eret’s back.

“I think,” Eret says, unable to hide that hint of a smile, “we’re all tired, and we all need to rest. What say we end the infiltration today?”

There are no objections, and Dream kicks the emergency ladder, the rope ladder unfolding, swaying about in the wind. They’re still quite high up, despite being at the bottom of the bank. Dream urges everyone to be careful, and he begins to climb down the ladder, one rung at a time.

Weekend

Chapter Summary

some s links

Chapter Notes

very very short bc i rly rly want them to beat shadow kris before 4th july

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

6/27 - SATURDAY - EVENING

“I’m back,” Clay says, grocery bags hanging from his arms. Nick probably in his room, recovering from their Palace run, and Mrs Armstrong is still working on her laptop in the dining room.

“Just leave them on the counter,” Mrs Armstrong says. She lets out a long sigh, typing a couple of lines into her document.

“Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” Mrs Armstrong says, pinching the bridge of her nose. “The stress from work is just... catching up to me.”

“Stress?”

“Yes,” Mrs Armstrong says, as Clay settles beside her, his schoolbag leaning against the table leg. He digs his workbook and pencil case out and places it on the table. “I don’t understand why they would appoint a *student* to carry out this investigation.”

Oh, right, Mrs Armstrong is the leading prosecutor investigating the Phantom Thief case. Clay bites his lip. He has nothing against Mrs Armstrong, and does not wish to harm her at all. But at the same time, he cannot stop his actions as the leader of the Phantom Thieves. Not when they’re helping people that can’t stand up for themselves.

“The student is...”

“Mr Blade,” Mrs Armstrong says. “That Detective Prince, as most people call him.”

Ah, the stoic, quiet Mr Blade. Clay knows him. He’s gone to, of all places, a jazz club with the man and finished a glass of the shittiest drink of his life just because he felt *challenged* by Blade’s general presence.

“I saw him on TV.” The TV set, actually, but same thing.

“Yes, he’s just that popular,” Mrs Armstrong says. “For now, at least. It’s funny how people would cling onto the newest fad for like, a couple of months, then just move on, like they never existed.”

“Blade is just a fad?”

“Essentially,” Mrs Armstrong says, shrugging. She closes the lid of her laptop, shaking her head. “It’s him who gets all the recognition, the credit, just because he’s wearing the face that the masses want.”

Clay nods. It’s true that Blade is everywhere now. That TV show where he appeared on was replayed almost every night for about a week after it was first broadcasted. Not to mention his fangirls.

“Well, I shouldn’t be keeping you from your homework with my rambling,” Mrs Armstrong says. She slips her laptop back into its bag. “Don’t stay up too late, alright?” She proceeds to head up the staircase, presumably for her room. Clay is left alone in the living room, his math textbook open in front of him.

It’s just him and math now. Just him and math.

*

6/28 – SUNDAY – DAYTIME

“That part goes there, and this part goes here,” Phil says, pointing at the parts of the gun that Clay is attempting to assemble.

“Oh. Thanks,” Clay puts the gun together, a shotgun with an electric-blue barrel, a lemon-coloured lightning bolt splashed across it. Bullets that can paralyze foes would be awesome. He’s giving this to Nick. Clay weighs it in his hand. He has absolutely no idea how Nick does it, carrying these heavysset guns around. Much less firing it. Then again, the Metaverse isn’t a normal place.

“Have you seen Tommy around recently?” Phil asks.

“Tommy?” Clay shakes his head. “I don’t think so.” Speaking of which he should continue to go for those lessons that Tommy’s offered.

“I worry for him,” Phil says. “I don’t think he has many friends at school. The only people he seems to hang out with are myself, Wilbur and occasionally Blade.”

It’s a small world after all. Even so, Clay is somewhat intrigued that Tommy hangs out with Blade. They’re on opposite ends of the law, or at least, Tommy used to be.

“That’s why I hope he and you can be good friends,” Phil says. “Maybe someone closer to his age would help him identify with his peers.”

Clay hums. Phil moves to pour himself another cup of coffee.

“I’m gonna die of caffeine overdose one day,” Phil muses, taking a large gulp from his cup.

“How’s the investigation coming along?” Clay asks. “About the...Punz Family.”

“The Punz Family?”

Clay looks up to see Phil furrowing his brows.

“What do you mean, the Punz Family?”

“Tommy didn’t tell you?”

Phil's expression is one between outrage and shock. "No, he didn't. He didn't say anything."

"Phil..."

"That Tommy...he never really liked to talk about his past, so I guess I should have expected this." Phil sighs, leaning against the counter. "Still, I'm curious how you managed to get that out of him."

"At my other job," Clay says, "Tommy had a run-in with two people from his old gang, who tried to convince him to go back."

"Did they? He didn't agree, did he?"

"No," Clay says, shaking his head. "He didn't. Wanted to stay on the straight and narrow."

"I see," Phil says. "Well, I'm glad that he's opening up to you, at least." Phil's phone rings and he picks it up.

"Tommy?" Speak of the devil. "No, I'm not free tonight. Why don't you go watch a movie with Wilbur or something? Wilbur's busy too?"

Clay smiles. Phil seems to trust him a little more. It's interesting how Tommy's bringing the two of them closer, even when he is not even present.

*

6/28 – SUNDAY- EVENING

"You actually borrowed it. I'm impressed," Wilbur says. His first bestseller: *Rulers of the Earth*, on the dining table. Its spine is rumpled, the pages yellowed, but at least it's still in mighty good condition.

"Yeah, I was interested in what you wrote before," Clay says. *Rulers of the Earth* wasn't even that serious. It was more comedic, in Clay's opinion, than what he initially thought of it. Maybe Wilbur just has an affinity for humour and ridiculousness. While the style greatly resembles his story on the War of L'manburg, it's a little...different in the vibes that Clay is getting.

"I see," Wilbur says. They wrap up their tutoring session, and Wilbur lets him read the new parts of his manuscript. Now that the goat-man won the election – after reading *Rulers of the Earth*, Clay isn't too stunned by such things anymore – the main characters are on the run from the kingdom that had suddenly turned on them, their citizenship revoked.

Fights broke out, hostages taken, prized possessions stolen. Wow, that got dark really quick, but the transitions are done skilfully, the descriptions of scenery, action and calming scenes paint pictures in Clay's mind. He can literally see the war happening around him, the rain of arrows whizzing by his head, the fires razing their beloved L'manburg flag to the ground.

Even so, there is something that's not quite right, but Clay cannot put his finger on it.

How could Wilbur, whose writing talent is displayed so well in both these stories that Clay has read, become so obsolete a writer? Perhaps he should be famous, like Collins or even Tolkien.

"I think it's not bad," Clay says. Reading Wilbur's earlier book definitely helped. "Is it going to finish soon?"

“Perhaps,” Wilbur says. “I plan on ending it when the two protagonists have taken back what they have built from the ground up. The story may be nonsensical, but there still is a moral and a satisfying conclusion.”

“I see. I think that’s good,” Clay says. “I’d buy it when it comes out.”

Wilbur laughs. “You have no idea how much that means to me. I think it will be done quite soon. Give it another two weeks or so.”

“What about your deadline?”

Clay regrets asking immediately. Wilbur’s face darkens. He pushes his spectacles higher up on the bridge of his nose as he takes his phone back. “It is not for another month. I have plenty of time.”

“Another month?” That doesn’t sound like a very long time.

“Yes,” Wilbur says. “I should be able to complete it in that time.” He stands to leave, thanking Clay for his thoughts on the story, and then leaves, his gait a little slower, steps heavier on the sidewalk.

It’s time Clay does some research about this...

*

Chapter End Notes

Empress arcana rank 4 -> 5

Knowledge +2 (studied)

Hierophant arcana rank 4 -> 5

Proficiency +3 (working at gun shop)

Tower arcana rank 4 -> 5

Knowledge +3 (tuition)

Bank of Gluttony: Infiltration Finale

Chapter Summary

last part of infiltration of the bank of gluttony -> the spherical maze

Chapter Notes

uni life is tiringgggggg

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

6/29 - MONDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

“What’s this?”

There is a book on the floor upon exiting the safe room. Eret picks it up, flipping it open. It’s empty apart from a page, cursive words written on it saying: $R = C = 0, I = 1, H = 2$.

“Math? Are you serious?” Skeppy looks like he’s about to puke. “Math is, like, the bane of my existence.”

“Is this a code?” Sapnap asks, looking over Eret’s shoulder.

“Maybe,” Eret says. He folds the piece of paper up and hands it to Clay. “Here. You ought to keep it.”

Dream pockets the piece of paper, then looks around. This long hallway is made of tiny vaults, like drawers with locks, or apartment mailboxes, a nametag on each one. Names that Dream has never heard before. Janine Brown, Perry Lancast, Rick Vannis...

“Dennis,” Bad says. “Dennis Howard Pein. That’s our classmate.”

Dream continues to walk till the end of the hallway, surrounded by vaults on both sides. He seems to have come to a dead end.

“Maybe we missed something,” Fundy says, already scampering back towards the elevator where they came from.

“What’s that over there?”

Right in front of the elevator appears to be a machine of some sort. There is a tiny display screen, with a pad of buttons beneath it, each button with one number printed on it. Above the screen reads: RICH.

“So that’s where the note comes in,” Bad says. “Dream, the note.”

Dream fishes the piece of paper, crumpled into a ball, out of his pocket. $R = C = 0, I = 1, H = 2$. In

that case...RICH equals to...

“Zero-one-zero-two,” Eret says. Dream inputs that into the machine, and the screen flashes green. The wall in front of them begins to move, sliding into place with a clunk, with a hole in the wall facing them, opening up a pathway. It must take them further towards their goal.

“Money...I need more money! I must grow richer!” Shadow Kris’ voice booms from above. Dream looks up, gaze shifting from the tops of the vaults, down the hallways. “As long as I’m rich, anything’s possible.”

“Where is he?” Skeppy asks.

“We’re just hearing what he really thinks,” Fundy says, “though the Shadow himself isn’t here.”

“So he only ever thinks about money, huh?” Sapnap says, folding his arms. “I think the sooner we change his heart, the better.”

Unfortunately, the next machine is nowhere in sight. However, there *is* one staircase at the very end of the new circular hallway. Perhaps it would provide them some clues. Dream heads on forward, Sapnap, Fundy and Bad by his side.

*

“So, here it is.”

They ran past several guards, got into a ton of battles, finally managing to find the PIN machine in a command room of sorts, except the monitors don’t actually show security camera feeds but rather large numbers floating on the screens, steadily increasing. A dollar sign sits in front of those large numbers. Dream scoffs in disgust.

“This one has a different word on it,” Eret says. “REAP.”

“Reap? But we only have the code for R,” Bad says, wringing his hands.

“Maybe there are some other code words lying around,” Dream says. “Let’s go look for them.”

They decide to split up, since there are three potential paths they have yet to explore. Dream and Eret take the path to the right, which brings them into a large room with shelves made of wire frame, giant safes placed neatly on the shelves in rows.

However, what really has caught Dream’s attention is the golden piggy bank similar to the one at the entrance of the bank, giving off an alluring shimmer.

The only problem is that this one is in the middle of a box of lasers. Like the one they saw in Marion’s Palace, but this time, it has also covered the top, so that’s a no-go.

“Maybe there’s a way to switch the lasers off,” Eret says. “Like what we did with the security cameras.”

Dream ducks behind a shelf just as a Shadow strolls right past them, baton in hand, cloaked in a red aura. Well now, if that thing had seen them, that would spell trouble, especially since they’re not at their full fighting strength at the moment.

“What if they’re on top of the shelves?” Eret asks.

Dream looks up. It’s certainly a possibility. There’s another hallway just above them as well,

accessible by climbing and walking atop the shelves. Dream retrieves a Pearl and hurls it at the top of the shelf. The Pearl sails through the air while the strong Shadow's back is turned, and Dream immediately teleports to the Pearl when it lands, Eret right beside him.

"It's there," Eret says, stabbing a finger at the direction of the hallway. Sure enough, there is what appears to be a switch over there, its design the same as the other one that switched the security cameras off.

Dream and Eret hop from one shelf to the next, the Shadows patrolling below none the wiser to their presence. With one great leap, Dream crosses the distance between the shelf and the hallway, bypassing the glass railing and rolling on the ground. He is quickly joined by Eret, who brushes dust from his jacket.

Dream's heels meet the glass panel, cracking it. Another kick shatters it, but what Dream isn't expecting is the alarm that comes with it.

["Oh crap!"](#) Dream slams his fist against the button. Red beams of light slice through the air. The shrill scream of the alarm pierces Dream's ears.

"The lasers are gone but the Shadows are converging! Come on!" Eret hurls himself off the hallway, dropping to the shelf below. Dream follows suit, landing with a thump on the wire. He doesn't look back as he and Eret runs across the shelves, till they're just above the piggy bank statue.

The Shadows below are gathering in droves, shapeless blobs emerging from the walls and the ground. Hell, Dream can hardly see the sheen of the floor anymore. He looks around. Is there anything that they can use?

A vent. A tiny one, on the other shelf, not yet swarmed by Shadows. It's small, but Dream is certain that they can fit in it.

"Okay, here's the plan," Dream says. "We're going to have to grab that piggy bank."

"There's no way we're going down there and surviving," Eret hisses.

Dream fires his grappling hook to the shelf at the other end of the room, the hook clawing at the wire frame of the shelf. Dream tugs at the wire, the hook holding tight. Dream wraps an arm around Eret's waist.

"Right then. We don't have a second chance, Eret. You'd better grab it," Dream says.

"What the--"

Shadows growl and bellow behind them like zombies. Dream hugs Eret to his chest tightly as he leaps off the shelf, swooping down towards the piggy bank. It's almost like a death sentence, plunging towards the flood of Shadows below.

It all happens in a flash. Eret grabs the piggy bank, the weight of it pulling them down even nearer the carpet of black. Dream squeezes his eyes shut just as the wire pulls taut, and they begin to swing upwards.

Well, Dream certainly could have seen this coming, but in hindsight, he's a bit of a dumbass. Instead of flying upward towards the shelf they were aiming for, they're headed straight for the shelf itself!

“Eret! Pearl! Now!”

Eret tucks the statue under his arm and fishes a Pearl from his pocket, chucking it up towards the shelf. Clay braces himself for impact, entire body tensing, head ducked...

And the impact never comes. Clay’s feet find purchase on solid ground, or rather, solid shelf. He dislodges the grappling hook from the wire holes and they make for the door, statue in hand.

A sudden, burning pain forces the air out of Dream’s lungs. He coughs, unable to make a sound, as he lurches forward, on his hands and knees, struggling to breathe through the pain.

“Dream!” Eret grabs Dream’s arm and drags him along. The fire on his back isn’t going away any, and Dream can only continue onward, stumbling, grinding his teeth. The vent is right there. Just a little more and...

Eret kicks the grate away and rolls the statue into the vent. He crawls into it first, Dream right behind him. The screeching of the Shadow behind them is getting louder and louder. Dream’s fingers scramble for the grate, pulling it back in place just as the Orthrus catches up to them, jaws snapping, paws clawing at the grate.

Dream heaves, his back in agony, as if someone set fire to him (which probably happened, considering the Shadow that has been chasing them). The Orthrus isn’t backing up. It remains, its tails swishing, dual heads observing them through the slits in the grate.

“I don’t think it can chase us in here, Dream,” Eret says. “Come on.” He’s already moved further along the vent, the piggy bank in his arms. Dream wipes sweat off his brow, then releases his grip on the grate. The grate falls forward, smashing onto one of the Orthrus’ heads, the canine demon barking and yelping.

“Let’s move! *Move!*” Dream shouts. He and Eret scramble through the vent, crawling as fast as they can through the narrow space. It feels almost endless, at least, until Dream sees a ray of light cast from above through another grate. Eret pushes at it, and the grate slides off easily.

When they emerge, shielding their eyes from the blinding light, they come face to face with Skeppy and Bad. They’re standing in front of the machine, the PIN machine, saving them the hassle of having to search for it again.

“Oh, thank goodness,” Bad looks relieved. “We were just about to go look for you guys.”

“Yeah, we’ve been waiting here, like, an hour,” Skeppy says.

It’s only now, when Dream’s finally calmed down some that he realizes that the alarm has stopped. It’s all quiet now, not a single Shadow in sight.

“Hey!”

Fundy runs up to them from the opposite hallway, with Sapnap strolling behind him.

“Looks like everyone’s back,” Dream says. “Okay, so what did you guys find?”

“Well, we found these pieces of paper,” Skeppy says, holding out said item. “Two of them, to be exact, but they’re all math.” On it are written: $P = I$, and $E = 9$ and $A = 3$.

“Math? Again?” Sapnap sighs.

“We found these too,” Fundy says, two more pieces of paper in hand. Also math: $U = A$ and $G = P$. The rest of the Thieves turn to Dream and Eret.

“And I see you came back with the whole shiny piggy bank,” Bad says, laughing.

“We were in a bit of a pickle,” Eret says. He shakes it. “How do you open it, exactly?”

“Snout. Press down on it,” Fundy says. Dream tries it. The snout slides in, just like the one at the entrance did, and the piggy bank dismantles itself, revealing two more pieces of scrap paper stuffed within. Dream smooths them out, only to find more equations written on them. $L = U + G$ and $D = G$.

“What’s with this guy and *math*?” Skeppy cries despairingly.

“It’s just simple addition,” Fundy says smugly. “Basic math.”

“The word we need is REAP, right?” Dream says. He inputs the code: 0931 and a strange clunking sound sounds out from the passageway from where they initially came.

“Tch, this isn’t anywhere near your quota for this month. Don’t gimme your excuses. Just go reap every last penny!” Shadow Kris’ voice booms in Dream’s ears. “I’ll make you understand if you don’t get it. People who can’t earn money are worthless to me!”

“Dude, this guy is fucked up,” Sapnap says.

“Language.”

“Let’s go.” Dream begins to run back towards the hall of numerous vaults, finding that the wall has once more slid into place, the hole lining up with the other one and forming one long continuous passage.

“I thought as much,” Eret says, gazing up at the walls.

“What do you mean?” Fundy asks.

“What this resembles is a lock,” Eret says. “The mechanism looks just like the one over here. When you insert a key in a lock, the tiny ‘walls’ in the lock will line up just like this, so that when you twist the key, the key will turn and the lock will open.”

After that, it is just inputting code after code, working out the math, Shadow Kris’ voice tormenting them.

“It’s not enough! I need to have a huge presence! I’m done having people walk all over me! It’s my turn now!”

Next word: HUGE. Code: 2319.

“This gold sheen...This...this is the fruit of all my hard labour! With this much, I will become invincible! Omnipotent!”

Next word: GOLD. Code: 1841.

“I’ve changed...I’m no longer the person I used to be...”

The final wall jerks into place, and Dream strides towards the final elevator, which takes them down, even further down, to the core of the dome.

[“There!](#) That’s the Treasure!” Fundy cries, racing towards a wavering sphere. Dream isn’t sure what it is, what with the lack of form and all.

“So when we send the calling card, it’s supposed to take shape?” Eret asks.

“Yeah. The Treasure is different from person to person,” Bad says. “For example, Krones’ Treasure was a crown, and Marion’s was the true version of the Sylvaria.”

“The true version of the Sylvaria...?”

“It’s fine, you don’t need to know the details,” Skeppy says quickly.

“Okay, so when we send the calling card is entirely up to Dream,” Fundy says. “He’s the leader, after all.”

“Yeah,” Dream says. “And I’d really like to settle this before the fourth of July, by the way.”

“He’s got a date.”

“What?” Skeppy cries. “You have a *date*? Teach me your ways!”

“It’s George, isn’t it?” Sapnap says, yawning. “Damn, man. Go get some ass.”

“Language,” Bad mutters, then turns to Dream, eyes bright. “You should get to know him first, like, really well. Go on a couple of dates...”

“Well,” Dream says, hand on the nape of his neck. “That’s the thing. You’re all invited.”

Dream can’t see them very well behind their masks, but he can imagine their stunned expressions.

“That’s not a date. That’s just him being friendly,” Sapnap says. “Dude, Fundy. What were you going on about?”

“I mean, it’s technically a date if you all decide not to show up.”

“We can get to know this George guy better,” Skeppy says. “Then we can play wingman. Dream, you can’t lose George with, like, five wingmen.”

“What the heck.”

“I think that outing can be our celebration after we steal the Treasure,” Eret says. “Gives us something to look forward to.”

“Right then,” Fundy says. “We’re done here. Let’s go back and rest for tonight.”

“Everyone’s done well,” Dream says. “We’ll steal the Treasure on the third, so we can be in time for July fourth. That means we’ll need to prepare the calling card on the second.”

There is unanimous agreement, and the Thieves begin to chat excitedly about the fourth of July, the fireworks and the carnival that’s going to be a total blast.

No one notices the person in the black mask slinking in the shadows, watching their every move.

Chapter End Notes

Dream's Persona stock (5/8)

- Principality
- Setanta
- Sudama
- Orthrus
- Rakshasa

Death Embraces All

Chapter Summary

here is a couple of s links before the heist

also what even is this title

Chapter Notes

im so happy i confused people with the last line

im soooo excited for the next palace

also, that fucking tommy + techno + dream (+punz?) against like sapnap, antifrost, bbh and like skeppy was coooooool and INTENSE

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

6/29 – MONDAY – EVENING

“Exams are coming up again? Already?” Clay looks down at his phone. Their class representative has just sent out their newest examination timetable to the class group. It starts on the thirteenth, which is a couple of weeks away, but still.

“Sucks to be you,” Floris says.

Nick seems to be studying diligently, headphones over his ears with his Physics textbook and worksheets laid out on the desk. Clay sighs. He’ll have to make do with the dining table then. As soon as he settles down, however, his phone begins to buzz.

Eret: Image

The screenshot depicts a message, filled with expletives, asking Eret that his deadline is drawing near. The number \$30, 000, 000 standing out rudely even among the string of curse words.

Zak: yo that's fucked up pal

Darryl: language

Me: did he just send this

Eret: he sent it while we were in the Metaverse

Darryl: he's not going to do anything before the deadline, right?

Me: i don't think so.

Eret: in any case, we're going to steal his Treasure beforehand, correct?

Eret: We should be fine as long as we do it before July ninth.

Zak: yep

Me: take the time to rest up. make sure you're well-rested on the third

Zak: yes mom

Darryl: o>

Clay locks his phone and turns back to his work. They'd better make sure not to fuck this up at all.

*

6/30 – TUESDAY – MORNING

“Why is the news always about that guy?”

“Which guy?” Floris pokes his head out of Clay’s bag, glancing around. The monitor at the train station shows this bald man in a suit, speaking to a circle of microphones.

“Markus Singh, or something like that,” Nick says. “He’s running for President this year.”

“And his face is everywhere,” Clay says.

“I will bring the whole of the Americas together. Unite them. Do what the previous government has failed to do...”

“It’s a whole lot of political shit that I can’t be bothered to listen to,” Nick says. The train pulls up to their platform, and the group squeezes into the carriage with barely any space to breathe. The train chugs off, headed for Enderlands High.

*

6/30 – TUESDAY – AFTERNOON

“As it turns out, in ancient China, there was a famous strategist who came up with the idea of the baozi, a traditional round Chinese dumpling with meat filling in it,” Ms Jenkins says. “Their original name is based on their appearance. Mr Clay?”

Clay straightens his shoulders. What was the question?

“What is the original meaning of the original Chinese phrase these baozi came from?”

What...is that supposed to mean? Where’s Yao Yi when he needs her? Oh, right, at the other end of the room.

“Uh...”

“Barbarian’s head,” Floris whispers from his feet.

Clay repeats the answer, and Ms Jenkins nods approvingly, a disbelieving smile on her face.

“That’s right,” Ms Jenkins says. “The baozi is supposed to represent the heads of barbarians which were tossed into the river as sacrifices. Zhuge Liang simply came up with the baozi as a substitute.”

Clay goes back to staring out the window.

“Thank Darryl,” Floris says, curling up by Clay’s feet.

*

6/30 – TUESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“Why’d you name yourself DRE?” Tommy asks, pointing it out on the screen.

“Because they only allow three letters.”

“What even is Dre short for? Is that, like, your actual name?” Tommy asks.

“It’s short for Dream.”

“That’s pretty ambitious of you, Dre, to be everyone’s hopes and dreams,” Tommy says. “So, Big D-“

“Don’t call me that.”

Tommy’s laughs that shrieking laugh of his. “Okay then, Small D-“

“Don’t call me that either.” God, this is mortifying.

“Then what do you want? D-money?”

“Yeah, that sounds good,” Clay says. “Compared to the others.”

“Okay, D-money, you’re getting better at this. At least you’re in the top five now,” Tommy says, gesturing to the screen, where Clay’s score is still shy of Tommy’s by...about a hundred thousand or so. “That means I can teach you another special move.”

“And what’s that?”

Tommy inserts a coin into the machine, and the game starts up again. Tommy picks the gun controller up again. “I’m gonna show you how to-“

Tommy’s phone rings, and he glances at the screen, scowling. He answers the call, pushing the controller to Clay. “Big P? No, I don’t have to go home now. I’m with Dre. D-money. The other part-timer.”

Tommy hangs up, sighing. “Hey, Dre. Big P doesn’t hate me, right?”

“What makes you think that?”

“Because he doesn’t wanna hang out with me anymore,” Tommy says, staring at the ground. The character on-screen gets killed, the words “Game Over” flashing in their faces. “He’s always ‘busy’.”

“I can say for certain that he still cares for you, very much,” Clay says. “There’s just been a lot going on with his life now as well. Give him time, alright?”

Tommy pouts, scuffing his sneakers. “Alright.” He then brightens up, grinning devilishly. “In the meantime, you’re going to hang out with me, right, Big D?”

Clay sighs. “Yeah, sure.”

“Okay, let’s play another round,” Tommy says, grabbing the controller. “You’re paying this time, big man.”

“Just one game. I’m not made of money.” Clay pops a coin into the machine and picks up the other controller. He’s going to *wreck* Tommy this time.

*

6/30 – TUESDAY – EVENING

“Thanks for agreeing so quick,” Joel says. “I simply *had* to test this out, so-“

“No worries,” Clay says, shaking his head. He’d simply told Phil that he had something on, and the kind man let him go. No pay, though. “For Lizzie, right?”

“Yeah.” The corners of Joel’s lips turn up into a smile. “For Lizzie.” He hands Clay the cup, and this time, it no longer smells of rotten eggs, the liquid no longer bubbling and frothing like a potion in a cauldron. Clay downs it with assumed ease, only to cough violently. Despite its appearance, its taste leaves a lot to be desired.

“So, are you feeling alright? Anything different?” Joel asks. “Say ah.”

Clay lets him take the necessary tests, and gulps down a glass of water at the end of it. Joel records the information down on his computer, and beams at Clay.

“I think this would actually work,” Joel says. “Or maybe I should tweak it a little more...” He hums to himself. “I’m going to have to conduct a few more tests, make it more potent...”

“There’s no need to be stressed out anymore, at this rate,” Clay says, leaning back against the wall. “You’re going to save Lizzie.”

Or so Clay thought.

The door bursts open, and a harried Rivers struts in, her arms folded. How? How is her timing so impeccable that she just catches them in the middle of their drug business every single damn time?

“What do you want now?” Joel fixes her with a bored look.

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news,” Rivers says, her expression one of disdain, “but I think you should know that you’re too late.”

“Too late?” Joel asks, glancing back to his computer monitor. The tension in the room heightens. Joel’s posture is straighter, his fingers tight on the mouse.

“Can you stop being an idiot for once!” Rivers shouts, her voice wobbling. “She died, Joel! Your wife is *dead*!”

Joel pushes his chair backward so hard it crashes into the wall. He walks right up to Rivers and grabs her collar, shoving her against the door so hard that Clay would have attempted to stop the him if reality isn’t sinking right in for him.

Lizzie. Dead. Those two words should not in the same sentence. At least not now, not in the near future.

“You’re lying,” Joel snarls. “You’re *lying*!”

“I’m not,” Rivers says. She winces in pain. “You can go...and check it out for yourself. Lizzie is... dead.”

Joel lets Rivers go and makes a beeline for the landline. He dials a number and presses it to his ear. The rising panic in his voice is evident as he speaks to the person on the other end, the very same panic giving way to despair, as Joel places the phone back onto its stand, slumping forward onto the table.

“I hope you’ve learned your lesson, Joel. Ambition only leads to failure,” Rivers says smugly, a wicked smile on her face as she turns to leave, slamming the door shut behind her.

The light flickers overhead. The sky begins to open up outside, the first few droplets of rain pattering against the windowpane. Joel is slumped against the table on his knees, body shaking.

“Joel...” Clay walks over, a hand on his shoulder. “Do you need anything?”

Joel doesn’t react. Clay bites his lip. That Rivers...that was too much, particularly that last comment. Joel didn’t do anything wrong by trying to save his wife. He-Clay wants to punch something all of a sudden. Preferably Rivers.

“We have to punish her,” Floris says. He pads over to Clay, tail whipping about. “That Rivers...we can’t let this slide.”

“Guinea pig. You’re still here?”

Joel is all choked up, face blotched with red, eyes puffy, hair dishevelled.

“Joel, I need Rivers’ full name.”

“Her...full name? It’s Petunia Henrietta Rivers...” Joel looks at him weirdly. “What are you planning to do?”

“It’s nothing you should concern yourself with,” Clay says. “I...Do you need me to walk you back to your house?”

Joel barks out a forced laugh. “No thanks. You just get home safe, you hear?” He sits with his back against the wall, knees pulled up to his chest, hiding his face, looking almost like a little child. Thunder rolls outside, as if even the heavens is mourning his loss.

“Petunia Henrietta Rivers, huh?” Floris says, climbing into Clay’s bag. “We’ll find her Shadow in Mementos and make her pay.”

*

Chapter End Notes

Knowledge +2 (answering question correctly)

Death arcana rank 2 -> 3

Guts +2 (shady clinical trial)

Temperance arcana rank 6 -> 7

Calling Card Sent

Chapter Summary

events leading up to the sending of the calling card

Chapter Notes

hello there can't wait till 7/4 i get to write gogy again

IM NO GOOD AT WRITING DRAMA SCENES PLS EXCUSE ME

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

7/1 - WEDNESDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

"There she is."

Dream runs right up to the woman who stands in the middle of a pillar of black fire. Her eyes are golden just like every other Shadow they've seen, dressed in that pristine doctor's coat of hers. Her face oozes with a sticky substance, dark and ominous.

"She looks horrible..." Bad mumbles.

"All the more we've gotta take care of her," Skeppy says, drawing his katana.

"The Phantom Thieves!" Shadow Rivers cries, spreading her arms. "Never did I think that you would target me. Me of all people! Do you even know who you're talking to?"

"Ah get off your high horse," Fundy shouts. "You showed up to Joel's clinic, claiming his wife is dead, and then you trample all over him as if his wife's death is all his fault!"

"He is the Plague!" Shadow Rivers exclaims. "He pioneered that drug and tested it on a patient when it wasn't ready! He to learn to face the consequences of his actions."

"You effing..." Sappan mutters. He brings his cudgel out.

"*You* were the one who tested it on someone else when it's not ready," Dream snaps. "It was *your* fault and you blamed it on Joel. *Then* he got fired and you got promoted. If you ask me, *you're* the one who should pay!"

"Shut up!" Shadow Rivers screeches. The black flames envelope her, a fiery shape tumbling and morphing within. "You don't know how hard it is for a woman to rise up in a male-dominated field! I'm now the head of the hospital, and no one can stop me!"

[Lunging](#) from the flames is a white-furred primate, a book clutched in its hands, a hat woven from colourful threads sitting on his head. Dream summons Setanta, the Persona charging at Shadow Rivers with its spear.

"Dream, look out!" Eret shouts.

A ball of blinding white sails past Dream, crashing into the ground where he was just standing, blasting a mini-crater into the platform. Dream barely manages to duck in time to dodge the next one, smashing into the wall behind him. Shadow Rivers deftly dodges a series of fireballs, fizzling into cinders as soon as they touch concrete.

Shadow Rivers rolls out of the way of Setanta's spear, releasing a wave of violet, crashing into Dream and knocking him completely off his feet. Dream hits the ground with a cry of pain, the sharp edges of the pebbles on the tracks jutting into his skin. Shadow Rivers cackles and moves to strike, only to be stopped by an arrow of light stabbing the ground in front of her, blocking her path. Fundy launches a tornado of green blades, slicing Shadow Rivers' tail into half. She shrieks, goo dribbling down the length of her tail, staining her fur a dark brown.

"You alright, there?" Sapnap offers Dream a hand.

"Never better." Dream pulls himself to his feet, gun drawn, aimed at Shadow Rivers. The rest of the Thieves follow suit, their guns of all manner and sizes, pointing at Shadow Rivers.

Shadow Rivers glares at them stubbornly. "You brats! You'll rue the day you crossed-"

"This," Dream interrupts, "is for Lizzie." He holds up an arm and only one shot is fired, the bullet lodging itself in Shadow Rivers' shoulder. Black blood spills from the wound and Shadow Rivers howls in pain, lurching forward in a kowtow position, her book dropped on the ground. Her Shadow form begins to recede, leaving in its place her humanoid form, still kneeling.

["Please](#) don't kill me! Oh my God, don't kill me! I'll tell you the truth! I promise!"

Truth? What truth?

"Lizzie...Joel's wife...she's actually alive!"

Dream stops short. "She's what?"

"I just had her moved to another hospital. A lesser hospital. I got the staff in on it too and told them that I would deduct their paycheck or fire them if they didn't play along. I just wanted Joel to quit of his own accord so I wouldn't have to take legal action against him..."

"That's low of you," Fundy says. "That's really low."

"I know! I know!" Shadow Rivers sobs. "Please don't kill me! All I've told you is the truth! Please!"

"I think she's learned her lesson," Eret says, walking up to Dream's side.

Dream lowers his gun, as does the rest of the Thieves. Shadow Rivers is still curled up on the ground, shivering and bawling her eyes out. She begins to fade into a spiral of butterflies, disappearing as soon as they reach the ceiling. In a smattering of seconds, she is gone, leaving the Phantom Thieves on an empty platform.

["Well,](#) that was fast," Skeppy says. "I was kinda hoping for more...action."

"To be honest, she wasn't that strong," Bad says, adjusting his scarf. "Is that all, Dream? Do we have any other targets?"

Dream shakes his head. "That's all for today." Trust Rivers to pull something like this. Lying to Joel, giving him severe heartbreak, just to see him resign of his own free will so she wouldn't have to deal with him. Fundy's right. She's the lowest of the low.

"Since we're here anyway," Fundy says, "why not we train more? I have this feeling we can't avoid a confrontation with Kris' Shadow."

"Agreed," Eret says. "Let's make the most of our time while we're here."

The Thieves clamber onto the Fundybus, and they speed out through the void, emerging once more back in Mementos.

*

7/1 – WEDNESDAY – EVENING

The doorbell rings. Clay has his head in the books in the living room, trying his best to memorize this block of text before bed, but can hardly contain his excitement at the fact that Lizzie is *not dead*. He'll tell Joel tomorrow – the man is probably resting right now, as he should.

"I'll get it," Nick says. He pauses the movie he's watching and saunters towards the door. He peeks through the peephole for a couple of seconds, then proceeds to open the door.

Standing there is the well-dressed gentleman that Clay remembers from long ago, his fedora in hand.

"Dad?"

"Is your mother around?" Mr Armstrong asks.

"Upstairs. She's working, though she should be done soon," Nick says.

"Could I wait then?"

Nick shrugs. "Sure."

Mr Armstrong makes himself comfortable on the couch, where Nick returns to as well. The awkwardness in the room is raised to unimaginable levels, like static electricity crackling in the air. The television screen is blank now; Nick must have switched it off.

The click of a door opening resounds from above in the silence of the living room, and Nick springs to his feet, making his way up to his mother's office.

"Mom, Dad's here."

Clay watches out of the corner of his eye, because this turn of events is making it too difficult to focus on his work now. Mrs Armstrong hurries down the staircase, only pausing abruptly when she sees Mr Armstrong who has now stood up.

Honestly, this would have felt like a romantic scene in a drama, if not for the fact that Mrs Armstrong swiftly turns around and strides back upstairs, not even giving Mr Armstrong the time of day.

Mr Armstrong makes after Mrs Armstrong, dropping his fedora onto the couch. "Please, honey--"

"I'm *not* your honey."

“If we could just sit down and talk...”

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

The chair beside Clay’s is pulled out, and Nick slips into it, looking somewhat torn. The two adults disappear upstairs, and their voices dissolve behind the slam of a door.

“I don’t think this is gonna work,” Nick says, sighing. “Mom’s too stubborn to listen to anything my dad’s gonna say.”

“Give them a chance.”

Nick glances at the staircase, worrying his bottom lip between his teeth. Well, Mr Armstrong isn’t coming down looking dejected or resigned or anything, or rather, he isn’t coming down at all.

Nick ends up helping Clay with homework for the remainder of the night, till Clay decides he isn’t doing History anymore. The two of them haven’t come down yet, and Clay can tell that Nick is getting worried.

“What if he did something to Mom?” Nick mumbles. “Like, I don’t know...” He trails off.

That *is* a distinct possibility. “Let’s go check.”

They ascend the stairs, plodding along towards Mrs Armstrong’s office, the only room with the door closed. Well, they’re still talking and not shouting. It sounds pretty amicable, actually.

Nick burst out in laughter. “I wasn’t expecting that.”

“In any case, I think we don’t have to worry too much,” Clay says, grin matching Nick’s. “Come on. I’m up for some Mario Kart.”

*

7/2 – THURSDAY – LUNCHTIME

“So, how are we going to go about doing this? Like, how are we getting the calling card to Kris?” Floris asks.

“We can’t go back and meet him. We’d get killed on the spot,” Nick says, stabbing his sausage with a fork.

“And even if we don’t die, I don’t wanna go back,” Darryl says.

No one speaks, each one of them staring at their food or chewing while racking their brains. Orthodox methods won’t work, but all they need is for Kris to *see* the message.

“I got it,” Eret says, snapping his fingers. “We’re all going to need disguises.”

“Disguises? What for?”

“Kris probably has henchmen all around Valentine Hills, correct?” Eret says. “What say we post the calling card all around Valentine’s?”

Floris nods. “Okay, alright. Sounds good. Everyone on board with that?”

“Well, it’s gonna be dangerous,” Nick says, “but we’re risking our lives every time we enter a Palace, so...” He stuffs food into his mouth. “I’m down.”

“Clay, what do you think?” Floris asks.

“We don’t have any other choice,” Clay says. “Today, at five, we’ll meet up with Zak at the station. We get it posted by tonight, so the effect will last till tomorrow night.”

The bell rings overhead, and Clay chokes on his last piece of salmon. They dump the plates and trays back into the bins by the washing area and head straight for class.

*

"What say we post the calling card all around Valentine's?"

"Okay. Alright. Sounds good. Everyone on board with that?"

A young girl sits in front of her massive wall of monitors, typing furiously away at her worn keyboard. Pop-up windows running lines and lines of code opened on the biggest monitor right in front of her. She leans back against her chair, pressing the earpads of her headphones tighter against her ears.

"Calling card? Then they *are* the Phantom Thieves!" Now, is it possible to get a hold of their leader's information...?

No you can't. You're a useless little girl, aren't you?

Yeah, your mom burned the house down because you're so useless and whiny and annoying-

"Shut up!" The girl curls up in her seat, clutching her headphones tighter against her ears.

"Today, at five, we'll meet up with Zak at the station."

"I'm not useless..."

*

7/2- THURSDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“Clay?”

There is a giant bruise on Niki’s face, among other things, like eye bags and a bandage across her nose. Clay closes the door and puts his things down, striding over to where she’s standing by the window.

“What happened? Who hit you?”

“Oh, this?” Niki touches her bruise, flinching ever so slightly. “It’s nothing. I’m okay.

That’s not okay, Clay wants to tell her. Not okay at all. “Was it your mother?”

Niki’s silence speaks for itself.

“Did your dad say anything?”

“He...He’s not around anymore. Cancer,” Niki says, shaking her head. “It’s just me and my mom.”

“O-Oh. I’m sorry. I-“

“It’s alright,” Niki says with a small smile. “I mean, my dad was pretty much the same.”

Clay purses his lips. That must have been awful, to live in such a household.

[“Thanks](#) for worrying about me, though,” Niki says, smiling. “Oh, and we should plant these new cranberry seeds that I just got.”

Clay decides not to push the issue, not when Niki is trying so obviously to divert from the topic. “We’re going to need a big pot for those.”

“You mean this?” Niki looks proud of herself, hauling over a giant jerrycan, its top shaved off, the insides filled with soil.

“I’m not even going to ask where you got that.”

Niki giggles and holds up the bag of seeds. “Time to get planting!”

*

[7/2 – THURSDAY – EVENING](#)

Clay’s legs appreciate the reprieve they deserve after running around Valentine Hills all day.

“How’s the investigation coming along?”

“That’s a pretty random conversation topic considering we were just talking about the copious amounts of sugar in this cake.”

Clay didn’t think Blade would like sweet food – the way he carries himself, the way he speaks surely didn’t suggest anything of the sort. Kind of reminds him of Darryl, apart from the fact that “Muffin” appears to be the only curse word in Darryl’s dictionary.

“I’m just curious.” Clay mumbles, poking at his cake. It’s a mixture of ganache, raspberries and hazelnuts, topped with almond sprinkles.

“It’s coming along nicely. Thank you for your concern,” Blade says. He barely gets the first syllable out of his mouth before he’s interrupted by a squeal.

“Is that the Detective Prince?”

“He’s even more handsome in person!”

“Someone’s popular,” Clay deadpans. He never thought that he would ever be surrounded by fangirls even if, ahem, the fangirls are not his.

“It’s annoying,” Blade mutters. He stands, pushing his chair back with the most obnoxious scrape. “Come on, let’s leave.”

“Leave? To where? I’m not even done with my cake.”

“Are you the type of guy who loves being in the centre of attention?”

“Not exactly.”

“Neither am I.” Blade starts, only to stumble when Clay pulls at his arm and he drops back into his seat unceremoniously.

[“Relax.](#) I’ve got a plan,” Clay says. He unzips his hoodie and throws it over to Blade, all while ruffling up his hair.

“What the fuck-“

“There we go,” Clay says, zipping the hoodie up, struggling to hide his laughter. If Blade was the Detective Prince previously, he’s definitely a Detective Pauper now.

“This smells,” Blade says flatly.

“I haven’t washed it in...weeks.”

“That’s concerning.”

Clay glances out of the corner of his eye at the two girls who seemed to have spotted Blade, along with a couple of others who have gathered around them.

“Hey, doesn’t Blade look a little different...?”

“I don’t think I particularly remember what he looked like, but I’m sure that’s not Blade.”

“That was...” Blade is at a loss for words as the crowd begins to dissolve. “That was sorcery. It has to be.”

“It just goes to show people just wanna get in on the hype,” Clay says, shrugging. “So, uh, you can give me those back when we leave.”

“As much as it stinks, I think I can keep it on.”

Clay bites back a grin as he continues to eat. “So, what were we talking about again?”

*

Chapter End Notes

Knowledge +2 (did homework)

Chariot arcana rank 8 -> 9 (Sapnap)

Hanged Man arcana rank 3 -> 4 (Niki)

Kindness +3 (gardening club)

Priestess arcana rank 2 -> 3

Bank of Gluttony: Life Will Change

Chapter Summary

shadow kris' boss fight

Chapter Notes

woooooooooooooooooo guys i love the piggytron idk why its so cute and destructive at the same time

didnt particuarly like the new kaneshiro boss fight cos of that stupid annoying bodyguard. i may be biased but i prefer most of the p5 vanilla boss fights lol but okumura is a whole new category of his own

did not re-read this at all

7/3 - FRIDAY - MORNING

“You alright there?” Darryl asks, whirling around in his seat. “You seem jittery.”

“You think he saw our calling card?”

“There’s no way he wouldn’t have seen it,” Floris says. “It was, like, all over the walls and everything.”

“Yeah,” Darryl says. “One of his lackeys definitely told him. We’ll just go into the Palace, grab the Treasure, then boom, get out of there.”

“We probably have to fight him.”

“No shit,” Floris says.

“Don’t say that,” Darryl cries. “Floris!”

“What? It’s not like we’re going to lose,” Floris says cheekily.

“That’s true.”

At that moment, the teacher walks in, and the class falls silent.

*

7/3 – FRIDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“He definitely saw it,” Fundy says, sniffing the air. “You can *feel* the security level from here.”

The escalators have stopped working, but the rope ladder that they unfolded the last time hangs

limply from the safe room near the bottom of the dome. Dream grabs the first rung and hoists himself up.

Dream leaps through the window, finding himself in the safe room right in that large personal bank. The rest of the team follows through, and Dream nearly recoils at the sheer aggression radiating from outside.

“Let’s move,” Eret says, and the group runs towards the elevator that would take them down to the final room where the Treasure should appear.

However, the moment they open the door, technicolour rays shine down on them. Dream throws up an arm to shield his eyes from the light. Standing in the middle of the chamber, surrounded by gigantic gold bars, dollar bills and coins that certainly weren’t there before, is Shadow Kris, dressed in yet another flamboyant jacket of his, a lustrous diamond hanging from his neck.

“He was waiting for us,” Bad mumbles.

[Shadow Kris](#) swaggers toward them, his hands in his pockets, his henchmen leering at them behind him.

“What’re you brats doin’ down here?”

“To steal your Treasure,” Dream says, “so hand it over.”

“What?” Shadow Kris drawls, cupping his ear. “Can’t hear that teeny weeny voice of yours.”

“Oh, this guy’s just asking for it,” Sapnap mutters, drawing his cudgel.

[“What?”](#) You guys wanna fight?” The same black fire engulfs Shadow Kris from the bottom up, burning away his striking pink jacket. Shadow Kris rips the diamond necklace from around his neck and casts it into the flame. Shadow Kris’ skin begins to turn a hideous shade of purple. His bloodshot eyes bulge from their sockets, morphing into that of an insect’s as antennas sprout from his head.

His henchmen begin to flee the scene at the true form of their leader, screaming and fading into dust. From behind Shadow Kris, the gargantuan vault’s wheel turns and the door opens, showering the chamber with bills of every form of currency out there, from US dollars to Swiss francs to Indian rupees. Emerging from the storm of money is an equally huge and fearsome piggy bank, metallic body glinting in the light as it rolls out of its confines, its name: Piggytron 3000 printed on its side. Piggy banks have never looked so scary than in this one moment.

“If it’s a fight you want, I’ll give you one!” Shadow Kris laughs maniacally. He spreads the wings that have grown from his back and bats them furiously, lifting himself off the ground. The Piggytron’s snout twists and reveals a cockpit within, resembling that of one in an airplane.

The snout squeezes shut and the Piggytron flares to life, its eyes glowing an eerie scarlet.

“Out of the way!” Dream shouts.

A beam of lasers cuts the ground where they were standing, searing a charcoal-black line into the metal flooring. The Thieves draw their weapons, but Dream isn’t sure they can scratch that thing with their blades and guns.

Skeppy is the first to strike, a stream of icicles spearing up from the floor where he stomps, headed straight for the Piggytron at lightning speed. However, it falls short, the icicles shattering when it

hits the Piggytron's body, barely fazing the machine as it begins to rain missiles upon their team.

"Ooh, that didn't work." Skeppy ducks, a missile crashing into the wall behind him, exploding upon contact.

"Carmen!" From Bad's fingertips, a giant fireball shoots through the air, slamming into the Piggytron's flank and fizzles into cinders. The Piggytron doesn't even seem to have sustained much damage. No dent, no blackened stain on its otherwise flawless skin.

"Ya see now, brats?" Shadow Kris' voice rings out from inside the machine. "You're all gonna die here!"

"So, uh, what's the plan?" Sapnap asks, raising his cudgel in time to parry a bullet shot from the Piggytron's snout. It ricochets and hits the ground, right by Dream's foot.

"It seems immune to most forms of damage," Eret says. "Fire and ice don't seem to work on it..."

"Then what about this?" Sapnap stabs his cudgel against the floor, electricity buzzing and crackling, bolts raining down on the Piggytron from on high. The Piggytron shakes and quivers, shrugging off the attack like it didn't just have a few million volts travelling through its body.

"No, it's damaged it a little bit," Eret says, grasping Dream's shoulder.

Dream summons Principality, a beam of light pulverizing the missile headed for them. The rest of his teammates dodge the rest of the missiles effortlessly, the projectiles exploding all around them, spraying dust and bits of metal into the air. Dream's ears ring as one detonates beside him, the impact of it throwing him halfway across the room.

Dream picks himself up only to see the Piggytron leap into the air (what the fuck), legs withdrawn into its body. It lands with a deafening thump, body beginning to spin on the spot.

"It's the march of the piggy, boys!" Shadow Kris screams. "I'm gonna mow ya down and flatten you like pancakes!"

"Oh crap!"

Eret throws out a hand, and a forcefield of light surrounds the group the same moment the Piggytron attempts to steamroll them, shooting forward like a cannonball. It pushes hard against the forcefield, cracks already forking across the forcefield.

"Bad! Reinforce the forcefield!" Dream shouts. Setanta readies its spear. "Sapnap!"

Eret grimaces, eyes squeezed shut as he strengthens the forcefield with Bad's help, a wall of fire driving the Piggytron further back, putting some distance between them. The Piggytron rolls even faster, smoke wafting from where it is grinding against the barrier. Captain Kidd prepares a ball of electricity, crackling between its bony fingers.

"Bad, Eret, I need an opening in the forcefield," Dream says.

"Easy for you to say!" Bad draws a circle with his hand, and the fire right in front of them dissolves, leaving a space where the Piggytron is clearly visible, its metal body spinning so fast sparks are flying.

"Sapnap! Now!" Setanta thrust the spear the same time Captain Kidd hurls that sphere of electricity blitzing behind the spear. The spear stabs the Piggytron, the ball of electricity drawn to

it, sparks concentrated in that one spot, blasting a hole into the Piggytron's body, revealing the delicate machinery within.

"W-What? What's happening?" Shadow Kris' shocked tone screams from the other side of the Piggytron.

"It's showtime!" Fundy leaps onto Skeppy's shoulder, and the duo unleashes their deadly combination of wind and ice, a hailstorm centred on the hole created by his and Sapnap's attack. The wires are cut cleanly by the green-tinged blades of wind, the hailstones battering everything else within.

"No! No, stop! What are you doing?" Shadow Kris yells, voice barely audible. The Piggytron begins to malfunction, stopping its spin and jerking and twitching. An explosion on the other side of the Piggytron, presumably the cockpit, resonates within the chamber as the Piggytron bursts apart, scattering metal everywhere, the remnants of wires and circuit boards, dollar bills and shiny coins flying and striking the barrier that Eret and Bad have managed to uphold. The Thieves are shielded from the explosion of the massive piggy bank, and Dream watches in satisfaction and awe as the debris bounces off the forcefield, lying harmlessly on the ground.

Shadow Kris is thrown to the ground, body colliding with the ground. He rubs at his back, picking himself up as Eret and Bad deactivates the barrier. Eret drops to one knee, panting heavily, Robin Hood flickering behind him.

"Y-You haven't beaten me yet!" Shadow Kris wobbles to his feet, his expensive coat having taken a terrible beating, crumpled and singed and torn. He bleeds from a gash to the forehead and he clutches his arm to his chest. "Guards! Come to me!"

His two henchmen burst forth from a mountain of cash, sporting the same insect-like features as their boss. One holds a blood-splattered shield, and the other wields a pistol.

Shadow Kris cackles as he takes a step back and his bodyguards advance. A bullet nicks Dream's cheek, the cut stinging, blood trickling down his cheek. Dream rolls away as the bodyguards open fire, raining bullet hell on them.

"Shit!" Dream glances back. Eret stumbles, having been shot in the leg. Blood spurts from the wound, unsightly amounts of blood spilling to the floor in a rippling crimson puddle.

"Eret!" Fundy scampers over, Skeppy on his tail. Skeppy summons Goemon and with one swing of his katana, a thick ice wall is erected between themselves and the stocky bodyguard, the one with the shield. It buys enough time for Fundy to heal up Eret's wound.

Meanwhile, Dream, Bad and Sapnap have their hands full with the other, nimbler bodyguard, the one with the pistol. Beams of light miss their mark, cannonballs dodged, eruption of flames from beneath the ground avoided.

"Exterminate them!" Shadow Kris shouts. "Exterminate them within the next minute and I will triple, no, *quadruple* your pay!"

Dream's blade meets the bodyguard's pistol, only to leap away at the growing circle of heat from below just in time to escape a towering pillar of fire licking at the skies.

"Money can buy you anything in the world!" Shadow Kris exclaims, laughing maniacally. "Watch this!"

At the sight of mammoth-sized shadows on the floor, Dream looks up just in time to see coins of

alarming sizes magicked from above, about to fall right on them! Dream sidesteps a coin that clangs to the floor right beside him, then leaps away from another that scrapes his arm.

A shimmering fireball incinerates the coins above them, and green blades of wind cut through the remaining tinier pieces.

With the sudden assault of coins, Dream has totally forgotten about the hired help. A bullet tears through his cheek, entering his mouth from one cheek and exiting through the other. Blood gushes from the wound, its coppery tang an offensive taste in his mouth, but most importantly, the pain is real. His eyes begin to tear as he musters his strength to summon Rakshasa, the demon bringing its sword down on another incoming bullet and slicing it in half, the empty shells clinking to the floor.

“Dream! Are you okay?” Bad rushes over while Sapnap keeps the bodyguard busy.

Dream can hardly bear to touch his face right now, not even to wipe the tears streaming down his cheeks, aggravating the wound.

God, all that wound invited is pure agony. Hurts, hurts, *hurts...*! The green of Bad’s fingertips is blurred, but soon the stabbing pain begins to dull into a light ache, then it is gone completely.

“Dream, we’re going to have to get rid of them before we can deal with Kris,” Eret says, running over.

“What’s wrong, brats?” Shadow Kris taunts. Dream grits his teeth. Trust that man to hide behind his bodyguards like the miserly coward he is. He folds his arms. “What are you waiting for? Finish them off! I’ll reward you handsomely if you do!”

“God, does that guy ever shut up?” Eret mutters. “Dream-“

“It’s that attack again! Everyone! Personas out!” Fundy shouts.

Dream looks up at the multitude of shimmering coins in the air, calling out Orthrus and bracing himself for the impact when...

The coins just...disappear. They vanish, no hint or trace of them anymore. They disappear into nothingness. Only one coin falls, flat like a pancake, in the middle of the chamber. The chamber is deathly silent. No one dares to make a move.

Then, the two bodyguards flit away, leaving a sort of humming noise in their wake.

“W-What? Where are you going? Come back! I promise you riches! I can-I can pay you, please-!” Shadow Kris’ attempts to hobble after them, one limp at a time, voice laced with desperation. When it becomes evident that neither of his bodyguards are coming back, Shadow Kris turns on the Thieves. From his expression of dread slowly creeping onto his face, he must not have been expecting the cold kiss of a gun’s barrel to his forehead.

“Seems that friendships formed through money doesn’t last very long,” Dream says. “They’re all abandoning you now.”

“What is wrong with you brats?” Shadow Kris bellows. “Why are you stealing away what I’ve earned with my hard work, my...my *money*-“

“All you’ve been doing is blackmailing people,” Skeppy says.

“Why are you attacking me? Why are you...why me? Why always me?”

“Even if your upbringing was hard, that doesn’t give you the right to hurt others,” Bad says, shaking his head.

“Keep on thinking that way,” Eret says, “and you will be beyond redemption.”

[“You’re all](#) the same!” Shadow Kris cries, sobbing pitifully. “You and...you and that guy in the black mask! Wanting to steal my money...”

Recognition flickers across the faces of the Thieves. A guy in a black mask?

“There’re people out there, ya know,” Shadow Kris mumbles. “There’re people out there using people’s cognitions, *Palaces*, for their own gain. If you can make use of the power of Palaces, you’d be rich, man!”

“Do you know who that is?” Fundy asks. “The man in the black mask.”

“I don’t know,” Shadow Kris says, shaking his head. “I don’t know. That guy makes sure not to reveal his face and all.”

Dream hums thoughtfully. “You sure that’s all?”

“I’m sure! Very sure! Please let me go!”

“You promise to atone?”

“Yes, yes! Please! Don’t kill me!”

Dream withdraws his pistol and slots it back into his holster. Already, the bank is beginning to collapse around them, dust gathering around them, mountains of debris toppling.

“We got the Treasure,” Skeppy says, holding up the briefcase.

“Right then,” Dream says. “Let’s go.”

*

[“That guy](#) makes sure not to reveal his face and all.”

“You sure that’s all?”

That’s all what? The girl sits at her computer, pausing her pre-recorded lecture to listen to this new and interesting topic of conversation.

“You promise to atone?”

“Yes, yes! Please! Don’t kill me!”

What’s this about atonement? And killing?

“We got the Treasure.”

“Right then. Let’s go.”

They seem to be all guys, as far as the girl can tell. She hums tunelessly to herself, continuing to type away at her keyboard as she hears the sound of ruin and destruction blasting through her headphones.

7/3 – FRIDAY – EVENING

“This is...”

The entire team is gathered at the Valentine Hills’ station square, right outside the stairway to the platform and the gantries. There is quite a crowd here at this time of day, but none of them can wait till they reach a private location to open the Treasure. Clay holds up the briefcase – the shiny, *gold* briefcase, to be exact – and unclasps the catches holding the shell together.

“Whoa!”

Right in front of their eyes, in the briefcase, are stacks and stacks of glossy dollar bills. God, they’re *rich*!

“Each stack is, like, a thousand dollars, so if we add these all up...” Zak says, holding a wad of bills in his hand. “Thirty million dollars?”

“The exact amount we owed!” Floris swishes his tail. “If we split it up between us then...we each get five million!”

“Dude, you’re a fox. Why’d you need so much money?” Nick says.

Five million dollars. *Five million dollars*. Clay can already *imagine* the things he can do with five million dollars.

“Sorry to burst your bubble,” Eret says, holding up a stack of the notes. “They’re not real.”

“Not real?” Clay squints at the notes, then a wave of disappointment washes over him. It is as Eret says. The dollar notes are counterfeit, because Kris’ ugly mug is slapped right on the front, mimicking the pose of the Monopoly man. How in the world did they miss that?

“What the hell?” Nick deflates like a balloon. “My money!”

Silence hangs over the group for a couple of seconds. Eret clears his throat.

“On the other hand, the briefcase looks rather expensive.”

Nick and Floris perk up immediately. “Do you think we can sell it?”

“Worth a shot,” Eret says. He turns to Clay. “You *do* know someone who’d buy something like this, right? No questions asked?”

Only one place comes to mind. “Yeah.”

“How about we have a celebration after exams?” Darryl asks.

“Exams?” Clay closes the briefcase, arm falling to his side.

“July the thirteenth,” Eret says. “Midterms. As Student Council president, I’m not going to let any one of your fail under my watch.”

Nick coughs and doesn’t even bother to hide his grin. Darryl and Floris stare at Clay.

“Excuse me? I’m not *that* bad,” Clay splutters. “Although, Eret, if you’d like to offer a study

session...”

“Dude, you’ve got George.”

“I’m *not* asking him out on a date!”

Eret laughs. “I can acquiesce to a study session. What say the rest of you?”

The Thieves head down to the platform in a merry mood. Had they stayed a while longer, one of them *may* have noticed a man, shrouded in darkness, appearing in the middle of an alleyway, eyes focused intently on their retreating backs.

July the Fourth

Chapter Summary

on a date with george

Chapter Notes

now we've just gotta wait for the change of heart

also, dream SMP spoilers:

WTF villain wilbur is all i ever wanted XDDD.

also i think P5R's Gentle Madman totally suits him now???

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

7/4 – SATURDAY – DAYTIME

“Sorry for dragging you all the way out here,” Nick says, as they trudge along the quiet street of Creek Walk, the calming noises of water running beside them. Sunlight filters past the overhead canopies, providing relief from the hot summer blaze.

“It’s fine,” Clay says.

They come to a stop outside a metal gate, dark with rust and overgrown with weeds. It opens with a creak, and Clay and Nick enter the graveyard.

It’s eerily silent, save for the crunching of their shoes against gravel. This graveyard is huge, with many graves lined up in rows branching off from the main path. The condition of the stones vary from one to the other, white to grey, new to weathered, cleaned and unkempt.

Nick continues to walk past the multitude of gravestones, till he comes to one at the end of a narrow gravel road. He kneels on one knee and produces a piece of paper from his pocket, folded carefully into quarters. He places the note by the stone, using a couple of pebbles as paperweights.

Neil Armstrong. The person whose grave Nick is knelt in front of.

“You know how I felt like my mom was neglecting me and stuff ‘cause she couldn’t take Neil’s death?” Nick says bashfully. “I think that maybe, just maybe, I didn’t actually properly remember Neil.”

Neil’s portrait beams up at them. He resembles Nick so closely that Clay almost believes that it is Nick’s face smiling up at him.

“I wanted to move on as fast as I could. I didn’t want to remember the fact that he died,” Nick says. He pulls the pendant with Neil’s picture in it out of his pocket.

Clay makes a promise to Neil Armstrong, right there and then. He’d protect his brother, won’t let Nick become nothing more than a past memory, than a yellowed photograph resting against a stone. Not now, at least.

“I want you to have this,” Nick says, tossing something at Clay, who catches it expertly. Opening his palm, he immediately recognizes it as the pendant that Nick’s either been carrying around or kept in his desk drawer. Clicking it open, however, reveals an empty space.

“But Nick, this-“

“I’m gonna remember Neil in here,” Nick says, thumping his chest. “I wanna give you that to, like, symbolize the friendship between us.”

Clay stares down at it, at the shine of the pendant that has kept a precious memory of Nick’s for a long, long time.

“Thanks. I’ll keep it safe.”

“Yeah, you’d better,” Nick says, laughing. He checks the time on his phone. “Well, it’s almost time to head back. We’re meeting the others at Valentine’s, right?”

[Clay](#) sticks out a hand and helps Nick up, sensing a strong, unbreakable bond between himself and Nick.

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast turned a vow into a blood oath. Thy bond shall become the wings of rebellion and break the yoke of thy heart. Thou hast awakened to the ultimate secret of the Chariot, granting thee infinite power...

For a couple of seconds, Clay notices Nick's Persona flicker behind him, no longer the rough, fearless Captain Kidd, but rather the confident and mischievous Seiten Taisei, cudgel in hand, riding a cloud of grey. Seiten Taisei grins with a certain playful roguishness, then disappears into Nick's being. Nick touches his breast, laying a palm over his heart.

"Damn, I think I just got stronger or something," Nick says with a laugh. "Anyway, we've got to be getting back. By the end of tonight, I'll make sure you'll get together with George. I guarantee it."

“All I’m asking is that you don’t make it weirder than it has to be, got that?”

The trip back to Jule Halls is filled with lively conversation, just two sworn brothers enjoying each other’s presences.

7/4 – SATURDAY – EVENING

“Oh, Clay,” George greets with a smile, slipping his phone into his pocket. He’s dressed up a little more casually than what Clay normally sees him in, which happens to be the Enderlands High uniform. A blue plaid collared shirt with jeans and red sneakers with a beanie perched on his head. “Wow, I wasn’t expecting such a big group.”

“He’s popular,” Zak says immediately, then walks forward and holds out his hand. Clay pretends that he isn’t dying a little inside. “How’d you do? I’m Zak.”

George shakes his hand, then proceeds to shake everyone else’s in turn, apart from Darryl’s.

Clay fidgets with the sleeve of his shirt. What does George think of what he’s wearing? He’s gotten a little more dressed up for the event than he normally would be, sifting through his limited wardrobe options for a polo tee with a pair of beige jersey pants. Well, he didn’t gel his hair; he’s not willing to go to *that* extreme, but he hopes that it impresses George, at the very least.

It’s not even an actual date and Clay is very, *very* nervous. *Pull yourself together, man!*

When they’ve gotten comfortably introduced, the group heads out towards the busy street, already filled with people with hardly any space to move. There are many roadside stalls set up selling food, some offering a chance to play carnival games. Further along the street, a parade has started, floats of all shapes, sizes and colours gliding down the asphalt, singers and dancers ripping it up on the stages.

“It’s so festive,” George observes. He holds a cup of fried chicken in hand. “I’ve never actually come to this carnival before.”

“I only came once,” Nick says. “Then my mom decided it was too noisy and loud.”

The fireworks are due to start soon, as the sky becomes darker and darker. The parade has ended, the ground littered with streamers and confetti and food crumbs. Within a minute, the sky has turned pitch-black, a few clusters of stars visible from where they stand.

“This is where the fireworks begin,” George says, moving to stand beside Clay.

The first flower of fire lights up the night sky, a magical sight that puts the moon and stars to shame. The ruby flower is followed by a seafoam green and a stunning azure.

Clay hasn’t seen fireworks this majestic ever. Only tiny shows held in his hometown during special occasions or days like today. Watching the fireworks with his friends beside him just feels way more different than watching them alone.

When Clay glances at George though, the latter quickly looks away with a small smile, as if sheepish.

Maybe, after tonight, Clay has fallen just a little harder for George Davidson.

*

“I think you did a great job, Clay,” Floris says. “Though maybe you should have seized your chance and proposed under the fireworks.”

Nick coughs. “You mean confess.”

“Yeah, that. You don’t know when a chance like that can come ever again.”

“There’s always Homecoming,” Nick says. “It’s smack in the middle of Spirit Week so probably about September or October. In the meantime, you can keep on going on dates with him.”

“You’re super invested in this,” Clay says bitterly.

“I am. I’m invested in you and George and Darryl and Zak.”

“Did you see Darryl wiping that ice cream off Zak’s cheek?” Floris’ smile is devious, matching the glint in Nick’s eye.

“Oh yeah, totally. Dude, Zak was friggin’ gay for Darryl the whole time.”

Clay buries his face in his pillow. Nope, he’s not staying up late to listen to his friends talk about him and how he was “ogling” him because Clay was absolutely *not* ogling George.

Clay’s phone buzzes. A message from Joel? Oh, and there’s a picture attached as well. He opens the image, depicting Joel with his arms around a woman, both smiling into the camera. The woman lays on a hospital bed, tubes running out of her nostrils hooked up to a machine.

Thank you so much for your help! Lizzie says she’s thankful as well! Happy July 4th!

Clay smiles. He’s glad that Joel managed to track Lizzie down. Not to mention that he’s heard their neighbours talking about Rivers’ change of heart on television. Not that Clay’s watched it.

Clay types back a reply at the same time he’s received a message from Ruby.

Happy July 4th!

Then, another message with a picture of Tommy with his arm around his friend. Clay’s eyes widen as he recognizes *Smith*. They know each other?

Hey big man did u watch the fireworks

More messages begin to flood in, from Smith, from Phil, Cheng, Niki, Wilbur and even Montgomery, wishing him a good July fourth. Clay replies to all of them in turn. His phone has never been this busy.

Floris curls up beside Clay, tail swishing in his face. “Oi, go sleep. We gotta sell that briefcase tomorrow.”

Clay locks his phone, staring once more at the new image displayed. A selfie that he and George took, warm smiles on their faces, holding their half-eaten ice cream cones. His heart skips a beat (just a tiny beat) and he plugs his phone in to charge, grinning to himself as he lays on his side, stomach fluttering a little too intensely to sleep much.

*

Chapter End Notes

Artist's Block

Chapter Summary

skeppy has a teensy weensy problem

Chapter Notes

yes i just realized that i havent started skeppys s link

i didn't end the chapter very well this time :P but i wanted to save the next scene for the next chap

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

7/5 – SUNDAY – DAYTIME

“I’ll give you a thou...five hundred dollars for this,” Phil says, reaching into the register and taking out the money, handing it to Clay. “Honestly, I’ve absolutely no idea *where* you get this stuff.”

Clay shrugs. The store is empty apart from a man looking at Glocks in a corner of the store. He puts his things down and gets to work, grabbing an AK-47 off the shelf to polish.

The customer leaves with a purchase, the door closing with a jingle.

“How’s the investigation coming along?” Clay asks.

“Oh, that?” Phil frowns. “It’s not really progressing. If Tommy says it’s the Punz Family, then it’s quite clear cut, but there’s something I can’t put my finger on...”

“You think someone else might be behind it?”

“Yeah, and Tommy was merely found by the Punz Family,” Phil says. “It is very possible that the Punz Family has nothing to do with the killings after all.”

“And how’d you know that?”

“Info that Scott found me,” Phil says, tapping the drawer, the contents apparently always kept under lock-and-key. “Scott gave up his career to get this to me, and I’m gonna get to the bottom of it the last thing I do.”

Phil turns away, an embarrassed laugh escaping his mouth. “Hah. Sorry. I tend to get a little passionate about this. Thanks for asking, though.”

Clay shakes his head. “I was just curious.”

“You’re a good kid, Clay,” Phil says, nodding. Another customer enters the store, and Clay goes back to polishing guns.

7/5 – SUNDAY – EVENING

“Would this be a good idea? Being on the run for so long, having weathered the harsh climate and terrain outside of their homeland, one of the protagonists makes a deal with the devil?”

“The devil?”

“Or God,” Wilbur says, leaning back against the chair. “He wants to blow up L’manburg and eradicate it all.”

“Eradicate it...why, exactly? What’s the motivation?”

“He has descended into insanity and become the very being he swore to destroy,” Wilbur says. “Because of the sudden realization that in this story of L’manburg’s attempting to overthrow a democratically-elected leader for the sake of their own successes, they are essentially the villains.”

“Whoa.” Clay nods. “Sounds good. I mean, it makes people think, doesn’t it? Reflect.”

Wilbur hums. His phone rings at that moment.

“Excuse me.” Wilbur picks up his phone. “Q? Alex? I told you, I’m not done!”

“I know man, I know!” the voice on the other end shouts, loud enough for Clay to hear. “But Ponk’s getting on my case. Or rather, *your* case. He’s gonna bring *that* up, Wilbur, I can guarantee it.”

Wilbur’s grip tightens on his phone. “I just need another goddamn two weeks, Alex. How hard can that be?”

“Wilbur, I’m trying to help you save face here!”

Wilbur slumps into his seat, a hand against his forehead, torment written clearly on his face. “Alex. Just two weeks. I beg you.”

“I...I’ll see what I can do, Wilbur. I’ll see what I can do. Hey, tell you what. I’ll meet you for drinks on Tuesday. How ‘bout that?”

Wilbur sighs. “I’ll be there. Thanks, Alex.”

“No problemo. Anyway, I gotta go. Bye!”

Wilbur ends the call.

“Who was that?” Clay asks.

“Hmm? Oh, Q? He’s my...uh...editor. Of sorts,” Wilbur says, rubbing his nose. “I have to submit my manuscript soon – the first draft, at least – or Ponk’s going to...you know what? Never mind. It’s nothing you should concern yourself with. I have to go now.” He offers Clay a tired smile. “Your input has been really helpful.”

Clay sees Wilbur out, watching the man trod toward the station, with one question weighing heavily on his mind.

The incident that Clay overheard Q talking about...perhaps Clay will have to look into it on his

own.

*

7/6 – MONDAY – MORNING

“So, the ancient Roman emperors were rather petty people, I would say,” Miss Jenkins says, pacing in front of the class. “Why, they wouldn’t even want to lose to each other when it comes to the number of days the month they’ve named after themselves have! You over there!” She stabs her chalk in Clay’s direction. “What were the names of the Roman emperors who were responsible for the thirty-one days of July and August?”

Roman emperors? “Uh...Julius and Augustus?”

“That’s right,” Miss Jenkins says with a clap. “It makes sense, because ‘July’ sounds like ‘Julius’ and ‘August’ is, well, ‘Augustus’.”

Whew. Dodged a bullet there. At least Clay didn’t embarrass himself in front of George...

*

7/6 – MONDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“I’m almost done,” Joel says, jotting down his observations onto a piece of paper on his clipboard. “I’d probably need you to come down one or two more times.”

“That’s fine,” Clay says, nodding. He’s actually feeling pretty good, after having downed that medicine. He tilts his head. “You seem livelier.”

“Do I?” Joel fills a cup of water for Clay to drink, then turns back to his computer, clicking away on his mouse. “Well, it’s only natural, I suppose.”

“How’s Lizzie doing?”

“Fine. Weak, but as good as her condition would allow,” Joel says. “Honestly, I have you to thank. I don’t know how you did it, but knowing that Lizzie is alive...” He shakes his head, chortling. “Knowing that Lizzie is alive...I’m happy. Really. And I’m gonna see this through to the end.”

Clay nods, smiling. “Make sure you take care of yourself, alright?”

Joel hums, fingers flying over his keyboard, the clacking sounds filling the room. “It’s almost sundown. You’d better get going.”

Clay rises and Floris hops into his bag. “I’ll be seeing you, Joel.”

With that, and warmth settling in his gut, Clay makes for home.

*

7/6 – MONDAY – EVENING

<Phoenix SC> so my daughter threw the stuffed toy back at me

<Phoenix SC> the ones I got her for her birthday

<Phoenix SC> said I didn’t care about her and is only trying to get in her pants

<Dream> that's horrible

<Phoenix SC> first of all, I wouldn't do that to my daughter

<Phoenix SC> and secondly, shes refusing to talk to me at all and locks herself in her room the whole day

<Dream> maybe you can ask her why she thinks that way

<Dream> and try to figure out the root cause of this

Maybe Clay doesn't know this man well enough to be an accurate judge of character, but from his interactions with Phoenix so far, he doesn't seem like the kind of guy who would do such things.

<Phoenix SC> I'll try, I guess

<Phoenix SC> when she comes back from school or something

<Phoenix SC> thanks a lot man for coming online even if it's just sometimes

<Dream> its no problem

<Dream> I hope things go well with your daughter!

Phoenix SC logs off first, as per usual, and Clay logs off soon after he does. He places his laptop back onto the shelf and moves to switch the light off. It's the dead of night and Nick and Floris are already asleep. Clay climbs into bed, and soon, he's asleep as well.

*

7/7 – TUESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

"Thanks for agreeing to meet with me," Eret says, shutting the lid of his laptop. "Just give me a few minutes..." He begins to pack his things, shoving them into his bag (a little uncharacteristic of the untouchable Student Council president that Clay's been hearing about).

"Did Kris send you any more stuff? Like threatening messages?"

"Well, he used to spam my email and phone, but ever since we stole his Treasure, it has stopped. Mostly," Eret says, shrugging. "Is this supposed to happen?"

"It did the last two times," Clay says. "The targets just...they kind of stopped acting for a while."

"Well then," Eret says, hoisting the bag up onto his shoulder. "We'll just have to wait. The deadline's only two days away."

The two of them walk down the hallway, headed towards the school's exit. "You seem awfully chill about this. Considering *you're* the one who's gonna pay the price if, well..."

"If we look at past data, although we only have two sets, there is a very high chance that the change of heart will result," Eret says. "There is nothing to worry about on that front. On the other hand, whether the change of heart will happen before the deadline..." He purses his lips. "That's a different matter altogether."

It's not obvious to someone unfamiliar with Eret, but through numerous battles and life-threatening situations experienced with the man, Clay can tell he's scared. From the slight waver in his voice

when he talks about the deadline, the nervous swallow when he thinks about it.

“That’s enough serious talk,” Clay says, waving a hand in front of Eret’s face. “So, where do you want to go first?”

Eret hums. “Perhaps somewhere that students go to for fun. I don’t usually have the time, or company, to explore such places.”

“How about the arcade?” Clay asks. It seems as good a place to start as any. Eret agrees, and the two make their way there, to the arcade that Clay frequents.

The doors open when they approach, and Clay breathes a sigh of relief when he doesn’t see Tommy there. As much as he’d like his friends to get to know each other, he’s not sure what to expect if Eret, the epitome of responsibility, happens to interact with whom must be the most energetic boy that Clay has ever met.

[“This is](#) the game I usually play,” Clay says, walking over to the Gun About machine. He picks up one of the controllers and urges Eret to do the same. Clay slips a coin into the slot and the game starts up.

“So, monsters are gonna appear on the screen like that,” Clay says, gesturing to the zombies and skeletons that have popped up from the ground and from the walls. “So you have to just...hit them.”

“Just like Shadows, then?”

“Yeah,” Clay says, blasting a few zombies into oblivion. “Just like Shadows.”

Eret is skilful. No doubt about that. Especially since they must have had much training in the Metaverse. There’s something about the way he moves to strike the enemies’ weak spot, as if he’s wielding his Persona’s mild navigational abilities in real life as well. He’s picked up on this game faster than Clay, and that’s saying something, but given the experience Clay has had, Eret’s score falls short by many thousands. Clay didn’t make it to the leaderboards this time, but then again, Tommy isn’t here to laugh at him so he doesn’t need to put in that much effort.

“That was fun,” Eret says, though he sounds like he just worked out. “Honestly speaking, I would never have come to the arcade myself.”

"Maybe we can ask the others to hang out with us next time," Clay says. "I know Nick likes shooting games, although Darryl or Skeppy may be less inclined-"

["Hey,](#) is that the Student Council president?"

"He's not going off and bothering someone today? That's new."

Eret tenses, but says nothing, quickening his pace. The two of them make it to the station in record time, tapping their cards on the reader.

"Bothering people?"

"Maintaining the peace," Eret says. "If I let even one offence slip by me, the rest of the student body will think that it is alright to...repeat those offences. I cannot turn a blind eye, no matter how small the offence."

Clay nods. Admirable, is the first adjective that comes to mind. "I see what you mean."

Eret smiles. "I'm glad you understand, Clay."

Eret's train arrives first. He and Clay wave goodbye, and they part ways.

*

7/8 – WEDNESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

"Clay!"

Clay looks up from his phone, finding Zak running up to him, breathless.

"What is it?"

"I need your help. Utmost importance. Basically, now."

"What." Floris mirrors Clay's dumbfounded expression.

"I have what you call an artist's block," Zak says. "If you don't know what that means--"

"I know what that means."

"Oh, great," Zak says, nodding vigorously. "That saves me a lot of trouble. So, I need you to help me get over this artist's block."

"I failed art."

"Don't make me more dubious of your ability than I already am," Zak says, narrowing his eyes.

"At this rate, I'm gonna have to ask the fox."

"What does that *mean*? Also, I'm not a fox!"

"So, uh, what do you need from me?" There's no way Clay is getting out of this. He has accepted that fact. Zak's eyes brighten and he beams.

"Great. I was thinking of creating this art piece about...about desire. You know, with all the cognition shit we've been doing lately," Zak says. "So, uh, yeah. Thoughts?"

"Desire, huh?" Clay touches his chin. "What about Mementos?"

"Mementos? Oh!" Zak snaps his fingers. "Great idea. Let's go. Now."

"W-What the h--"

The scene changes around them, and Dream finds himself standing once more outside the Valentine Hills station, the people around them having disappeared, replaced by pulsing veins and a blood-red sky. The entrance to Mementos lies in front of them, its familiar darkness beckoning them in.

Skeppy hums a merry tune as he skips his way down the stairs. Dream sighs, tucking his hands into his pockets, and follows after him, Fundy by his side.

The trio finds a small alcove tucked away in a void of Mementos. Skeppy settles down on the ground and pulls out his sketchpad, removing his mask and shoving it away. He pulls out a pencil too – from God knows where – and begins to sketch.

Now, Dream doesn't know the first thing about art. At all. Watching Skeppy just tear into the page is, frankly, quite boring.

"Are you done?" Fundy asks.

"Shh!" Skeppy hisses. "Don't rush me. Art takes time."

At the sound of groaning, Dream glances around. A couple of black blobs are already taking shape, the Shadows transforming into their monster forms.

Well then, since Dream and Fundy are bored anyway...

The Shadows, being weaker ones, are cleared out in a matter of minutes. Dream shrugs off some gelatinous substance and sheathes his dagger the same time Skeppy pumps his fists into the air. "I'm done!"

"Good for you," Dream says. "Why'd you bring me out here anyway if you're just gonna sketch away?"

Skeppy gestures to the black blobs around them. "Shadows."

So Dream has been reduced to a bodyguard.

"Okay, I'm done. Let's go!" Skeppy strides off towards the void. Fundy and Dream exchange exasperated expressions, but follows after him, the three of them heading back up towards the entrance of Mementos.

[Clay waits](#) till the world stops pulsing around them. He's changed back to his school uniform, Floris back into his furry form. Zak clutches his sketchpad to his chest and flashes Clay a thumbs-up sign.

"Thanks man," Zak cries. "I've got inspiration now and the masterpiece is gonna be *great*!"

Clay holds up a thumbs-up sign as well. "You got this, Zak."

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast acquired a new vow. It shall become the wings of rebellion that breaketh thy chains of captivity. With the birth of the Star Persona, I have obtained the winds of blessing that will lead to freedom and new power...

"Right then. Darryl's waitin' for me! See ya!" He sprints off towards the platform, and Clay and Floris watch him go.

"That was weird," Floris says. "Let's go home, Clay."

Clay yawns. Man, hanging out with Zak can be rather exhausting. How does Darryl *manage* it?

*

Chapter End Notes

Proficiency +3 (working at the gun shop)
Tower arcana rank 5 -> 6 (Wilbur)
Knowledge +3 (tuition)
Knowledge +2 (answered question correctly)
Temperance arcana rank 7 -> 8 (Smallishbeans/Joel)
Guts +2 (clinical trial)
Hermit arcana rank 3 -> 4 (phoenix sc)
Proficiency +3 (crafting with Phoenix)
Emperor arcana rank 1 -> 2 (eret)
Star arcana rank 0 -> 1 (skeppy)

Exams Are Coming Up...

Chapter Summary

in which james kris is arrested

Chapter Notes

so this is pretty short since its just the arrest and stuff

and im deciding between watching fuchsia franksteins or violet vampires this mcc
(but im probably gonna miss the streams since its gonna be 3am here)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

7/8 – WEDNESDAY – EVENING

Nick: Tmr's the deadline

Eret: theres nothing to worry about. The threats have stopped coming

Darryl: yeah but we shouldn't let our guard down.

"He's right, though," Floris says. "Anything can happen tomorrow. But we have to believe."

Me: I think we should be fine. This is the third heist, right?

Zak: yeah and marion's worked out real well btw

Zak: so we shld be good

Eret: in any case, we shall see tomorrow.

Eret: have a good night's rest, everyone

Eret: and remember to study for your exams :)

Zak: what exams

["Oh, look](#) at that." Nick laughs. "The smiley face of doom."

"Screw exams," Clay mumbles. He's reading the new book he's borrowed from the library. A book about Robin Hood and his band of Merry Men. Man, Robin Hood shows some real guts here, being so courageous to dive deep into enemy territory to steal money from the rich.

"If you fail anything, you're going right to juvie," Nick says, tutting.

"I'm not gonna fail anything." While Clay may not be the brightest student, at least he's doing well enough to be confident that he *won't* fail. He has put more effort into schoolwork these past few

months than his entire first year of high school combined.

Clay stops reading at midnight, when Nick declares that he's done enough homework for the day. Clay pulls the covers over his body, the palpitations in his heart still going strong.

The change of heart *must* happen tomorrow.

*

7/9 – THURSDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

"I heard," Eret says, "that James Kris has turned himself in to the police."

"You heard? From who?" Clay asks. The Thieves are gathered outside the Valentine Hills station, at their makeshift hideout.

"Blade," Eret says, scrolling through his phone.

"How are you friends with him?" Nick asks. "I mean, isn't that guy a celebrity?"

"I met him through...we were participants at a symposium once."

"Symposium? That guy?"

"Surprising," Eret says, "but not impossible. In any case, it seems that the change of heart has worked."

"Great!" Zak exclaims. "Do we wanna go somewhere to celebrate?"

"Exams first," Darryl says, hand on his shoulder. "You don't have exams, but the rest of us do."

"We can always celebrate after," Eret says, straightening his tie. "Though, wouldn't the festival have counted as a celebration already?"

"Let's think of it as an after-exam celebration, then," Clay says. "Please, I need some motivation. Also, Eret, about that study session..."

"We can hold it tomorrow, if you're fine with that," Eret says. "We can study in the Student Council room, or, well, the diner if everyone wants to come."

"I'll come for the sole purpose of distracting the lot of you," Zak says proudly.

"Same here," Floris says, wagging his tail.

They have taken down yet another target and avoided another gruesome fate. With their new teammate, adept at scanning enemies and some basic combat skills, Eret, the team seems to have gotten closer to one another...

"Tomorrow, at the diner then," Darryl says. "Straight after school."

*

??/? - ??? - ???

"The police did find it strange that James Kris willingly turned himself in, muttering about the Phantom Thieves," Mrs Armstrong says. She shakes her head. "Yet, if I am to believe what you

have told me, then it all makes sense. How else would a group of teenagers like you have successfully changed his heart?"

It seems that Mrs Armstrong is finally starting to listen. Clay plays with his fingers, hissing when pain stabs at his temples. Mrs Armstrong's mouth is open, shouting at him, but the ringing in his ears won't stop.

They do die down, and his blurry vision clears. There are worried lines on Mrs Armstrong's face. Clay sits back upright, shutting his eyes for a few moments.

"They pumped you full of drugs," Mrs Armstrong clicks her tongue disapprovingly. "I'll make sure they get you immediate medical attention once we get you to juvenile hall."

Juvie, huh?

"So, your next target." Mrs Armstrong flips the file to its next page, a printout of their target's logo: Medjed, slipped within its folder, alongside other pieces of information that Clay can't make heads or tails of. "They are so massive, so *secure*, that it makes James Kris look like small fry. Your group managed to take down such a big organization within such a short period of time. Tell me, how did you do it?"

*

7/9 – THURSDAY – EVENING

"You look tired," Clay says, peeling potatoes, strips of potato skin falling into the trash bin. He frowns as he adjusts the potato in his hands. Nope, the skin's still falling in tiny pieces and strips.

"The head of the Kris Family's turned himself in," Mrs Armstrong says, sighing.

"The Kris Family?"

"Yes, a mafia group who has made Valentine Hills their home base," Mrs Armstrong says. "We've been trying to catch their leader for years, yet we could never find a shred of evidence that would point us in the right direction."

"Isn't it good that he's caught now?"

"That's what you think," Mrs Armstrong says bitterly. She finishes dicing the garlic, tiny squares of the vegetable clumps on the cutting board, and places the knife in the sink. "However, we've received word that the Phantom Thieves have placed their calling cards all around Valentine Hills. The worst part about this is that the public believes that the Phantom Thieves are seriously doing good for the society."

"But they are," Clay says. He grabs another potato and begins to peel it.

Mrs Armstrong harrumphs. "Even if they are, it reflects badly on the police force and the justice system itself. I have no idea how the Phantom Thieves are doing it, but taking down someone like that has made our lives that much harder."

Clay refuses to believe that they shouldn't have done what they did. Kris was hurting so many of their school's students, as well as other members of the public that Clay does not know about. Those broken, crumpled ATMs are proof of that. There was no way the Thieves would let that stand.

“Anyways, your exams is coming up,” Mrs Armstrong says. “I hope Mr Soot has been of help, regarding your Literature.”

“Yes, he’s been very helpful.”

The topic of conversation shifts, with Mrs Armstrong commenting about how summer holidays is near, though she cannot take time off work since she is about to get a promotion soon, finally recognized for her efforts in pursuing the Phantom Thieves.

Perhaps Clay understands Mrs Armstrong a little more now...

*

??/? - ??? – MIDNIGHT

“I see you’ve purged one who has fallen to the sin of gluttony,” Igor says with a wave of his hand. “I must say, you are starting to give me hope that the rehabilitation will not end in failure.”

“Thanks.”

“Well then, I wonder to what heights you would soar to next.”

Clay can feel the distance between himself and Igor closing...

At Caroline’s command, Clay sits back down on the lumpy mattress, the same feeling of sleepiness washing over him.

*

7/10 – FRIDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“It’s remarkably quiet here,” Eret says, as they step into the diner.

“Exams,” Nick says. “People are studying.”

Enderlands High students seem to make up the majority of customers here at this time of the day. The group finds a booth big enough to house their six members by the window.

Needless to say, the smartest people at the table are Darryl and Eret, though Nick isn’t too bad himself. Floris and Zak, on the other hand, are just plain disruptive, giving wrong answers whenever they can. Of course, it amuses Eret, who knows the actual answers, but Clay has half a mind to kick the both of them out of the diner altogether.

“Let’s take a break,” Clay says loudly, head hitting the backrest of the booth seat. “I’m dead.”

“I think we should, too,” Eret says. Nick sips from his cup of iced coffee, chewing on the straw. “We’ve been studying for three hours straight.”

“Yeah, you guys are boring,” Zak says, fingers clasped behind his head. “Wait, don’t three people here have curfew at seven?” He glances at his watch. “It’s six.”

“Excuse me. I don’t have a curfew,” Floris says, jumping onto the table. “I just *happen* to follow these unlucky chaps’ schedules because I live with them.”

“Eh, same thing.”

“Mom’s out today. Interrogating Kris,” Nick says. “We’re good.”

“Let’s have dinner,” Darryl says. “I’ve been craving their smoothie for a while.”

“Smoothie? The tropical fruits one?”

“Yeah.”

They wrap up their study session for the day, keeping their materials and ordering dinner.

[“So, who](#) should we target next?” Nick asks, scrolling through the Phan-Site.

“We took down James Kris. He’s a big name in the criminal underworld, so I’d like to think that we’ve proven our justice to the vast majority of the audience,” Eret says.

“Oh, hey, look,” Nick says, placing his phone flat on the table. “Cheng changed the question.”

Instead of asking whether the audience believes in the Phantom Thieves, the poll question is now asking: “Are the Phantom Thieves just?” To Clay’s delight, the percentage of people who agree with them have doubled, from a measly twenty percent last he checked to a whopping forty percent.

“Wow,” Darryl says. “We’re famous.”

“Yeah,” Clay says. “It’s kinda surreal, actually.”

“Well, we can’t disappoint, then,” Eret says. “Who should our next t-“ Clay must admit, the speed at which Eret snaps his mouth shut upon the arrival of the waitress is pretty funny. She delivers most of their food, wishing them a good evening, and heads back into the kitchen, presumably to grab the rest of their food.

“As I was saying,” Eret says, clearing his throat, “who should our next target be?”

“Someone even bigger,” Floris says. “Someone even bigger than Kris.”

“Who, though?” Nick asks, chowing down on his fish fillet. “Kris was pretty big, if you ask me.”

“How about we make that our homework?” Eret says. “We can always meet up again after exams to discuss this.”

The waitress returns with the rest of their food, and Clay finally gets to slurp his clam chowder. Between his studies and Phantom Thief activities, there is no contest and leaves him questioning why exams exist.

They part ways at the station, and Clay, Nick and Floris head back to Jule Halls.

*

Chapter End Notes

Fool arcana rank 2 -> 3 (phantom thieves)
Empress arcana rank 5 -> 6 (mrs armstrong)
Proficiency +3 (cooking)

Judgement arcana rank 1 -> 2 (igor)

Are the Phantom Thieves Just?

Chapter Summary

in which dream has small talk with blade and tubbo

Chapter Notes

heres some story stuff basically the days leading up to exams

imagine doing 45 marks worth of chem (drawing mechanisms and shit) in 15mins...

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

7/10 – FRIDAY – EVENING

“This will be the final time I’ll be asking for your help,” Joel says, leaning back against his seat and kicking his legs up on the desk. “I should have all the data I need to complete the medicine.”

“Awesome. I hope Lizzie’s doing well.”

“Oh you bet she is,” Joel says, sporting a bright grin. He laughs, shaking his head. “You know, I got invited to work at Fariold General Hospital, on a research project involving the creation of medicines for other incurable illnesses.”

“Seriously? You should go,” Clay says.

“I *was* thinking about it,” Joel says, “but at the same time, I didn’t want to abandon this...this hole-in-a-wall place I’ve built up for myself here. You remember Alison? That girl who came over with her father?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve almost forgotten what it was like to serve with heart,” Joel says. “Seeing the residents around here so happy with their medical treatment, I feel content. There’s no other word to describe it.” He rubs at his chin. “I’ll consider it, though. Through this project, I can probably help more people.”

“More people like Lizzie,” Clay says, nodding. “That’s admirable.”

“Well, I could never have done it without your help,” Joel says. “I can still sell you medicine if you need any. On discount, even.”

“Thanks,” Clay nods, smiling.

“Right then, I’m sure you’re pretty busy,” Joel says. “If you’re not feeling dizzy or anything, you can go now.”

Clay stands and grabs his bag. “Good luck, Joel.”

“You too, Clay.”

*

7/11 – SATURDAY – DAYTIME

“That’s not very poggers of you, Big D.”

Clay sighs, placing the controller back into its holster. “You don’t sound very happy.”

Tommy is scrolling through his phone, controller in his other hand. “It’s nothing. Just got a lot on my mind.”

This really isn’t like Tommy at all. It’s almost as if he’s become someone totally different.

“Why don’t we end the ‘lesson’ here?” Clay says, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. “I’ll treat you to food. How’s that sound?”

At the mention of food, Tommy’s eyes light up. “Yeah, I’m hungry. Let’s go eat, Big D.”

“Call me that again and I’m retracting my offer.”

Tommy’s eyes light up at that. “Okay, I take it back. Let’s go, big man.”

They make their way to the same crepe stand that Clay always eats at, Clay purchasing crepes for the both of them.

“With extra sprinkles,” Tommy says.

Clay pays the additional fifty cents and hands the crepe to Tommy. They find a bench to sit on, munching on their crepes while they watch people striding to and fro along this busy street.

“Did you speak to Phil?”

Clay raises a brow. “Hm? Why’d you ask?”

“He asked me whether I wanted to go and get some fish and chips,” Tommy says. “Just, out of the blue like that.” He waves a hand dramatically. “It was so weird. Like, he was ignoring me for days on end, then suddenly, bam! He wants to hang out.”

“Then you figured that I had something to do with it?”

Tommy makes a face as he crunches into the chocolate biscuit sticking out from the vanilla ice cream. “Yeah, well, it just clicked, you know.”

“I can assure you I had nothing to do with it.”

Tommy fixes him with a suspicious frown. “Didn’t you now?” They continue to eat in silence, which is, quite frankly, strange by itself. Tommy is usually never this quiet for so long.

“Oh, yeah, thanks for hanging out with me,” Tommy says, scratching his head furiously. “I think you’re the first friend around my age that I have, other than Tubbo and...and Blade, but when I speak to Blade I feel like I’m talking to an old man.”

Clay bites back a laugh. “And Smith?”

“That’s Tubbo.”

“Oh.”

“But I’m the only one who calls him that,” Tommy says. “Wait, we’re getting off topic. So, uh... God, this is embarrassing. Can you stop looking at me like that?”

“I’m waiting.”

“Thanks for...for being my friend, Dre,” Tommy says, then immediately slurps up the melting ice cream, hiding his face behind the crepe. “Even though Phil probably put you up to it.”

“Well, that and you’re my teacher right now,” Clay points out.

“Yeah man. People like to learn from tough guys and I’m the toughest man around.”

Clay rolls his eyes as Tommy launches into a tirade about how clingy Smith, or Tubbo, is. Well, at least Tommy’s enjoying himself, and that’s good enough for him.

*

7/11 – SATURDAY – EVENING

“I thought you called me out here for a study session,” Clay says, chewing on his pen.

“I did and I know we’re supposed to be studying, but *have you seen the Phan-Site?*” Yao Yi is leaning back against her seat, phone in hand, work abandoned on the table.

Clay drags his hand across his face. “For all I know, you’ve been on that forum for days.”

“Yeah, but have you *seen it?*”

“Yes, you changed the question,” Clay says. “I’ve seen it, and so have the others.”

“Well, aren’t you glad that you have me?” Yao Yi says, finally, *finally* getting off that damn website. “Without me, where would you guys be today? Probably wouldn’t be half as popular.”

Clay opens his mouth in an attempt to get a word in, but Yao Yi continues rambling. “If I can help the Phantom Thieves, I can be a hero too, right? I won’t be a zero anymore. I can...I can-“

“Whoa, calm down,” Clay raises his voice, and Yao Yi shuts up immediately. “Look, I appreciate your help and all-“

“You appreciate my help,” Yao Yi repeats, then chuckles. “You appreciate me. I...The leader of the Phantom Thieves...”

Oh God.

“I have a few more requests lined up for you, by the way,” Yao Yi says, unlocking her phone again. “Look, see, like this man over here...”

There’s no way he’s going to get any studying done like this. Clay puts away his books and pencil case while Yao Yi goes on and on about potential targets who, in Clay’s opinion, aren’t in need of a change of heart. He stops listening after the third one, instead wondering what kind of burger he should buy...

7/12 – SUNDAY – DAYTIME

“Tommy told me you took him to eat fish and chips.”

Phil looks up from his papers. “Huh? Yeah, I did. He’s been pestering me for a while now.”

Why does Clay *always* trust Tommy?

“You look tired.”

Phil yawns pointedly. “Running a store like this every single day takes a lot outta you. Don’t worry about me, kid.” He pauses and considers this. “Actually, you can pour me a coffee.”

Clay snickers and walks over to the machine, making both himself and Phil a cup.

“Thanks,” Phil says, gulping down the dark, bitter liquid.

“How’s that case you’re working on?” Clay asks. “Any progress?”

Phil shakes his head, sighing. “There is something strange about the whole thing, but the strangest of all is this piece of evidence that I don’t remember seeing filed in the initial investigation reports.”

“What is it?”

“A pistol,” Phil says. “Marked with the logo of the state police. The thing is, the pistol could have belonged to either one of Tommy’s parents, so maybe I overlooked it, but here’s the thing. The fingerprints were wiped.”

“Could they have been wearing gloves?”

“Well, Tommy’s parents weren’t in the habit of wearing gloves,” Phil says, touching his chin absently. “But if you think about it, there’s no conceivable reason the mafia would want to wipe the fingerprints off a random pistol and leave it at the crime scene.”

“They would have just taken the pistol with them.”

“Exactly,” Phil says. “Moreover, the evidence itself was hidden; it wasn’t in the preliminary findings.”

“So you’re saying that someone intentionally hid the evidence.”

“Yes,” Phil says. “And the only person who could have done that is someone in the police force. And that’s why Scott was fired for digging too deep. God, how could I have missed this?”

Phil leans back against his seat, a hand on his forehead.

“It’s not your fault,” Clay says. “The perpetrator hid the evidence. There was no way you would have known.”

Phil barks out a bitter laugh. “Even then, I can’t help feeling guilty, you know. But with that said, I still need to do some research on possible perpetrators. I can think of a few jealous officers but nothing concrete that I can base it on.” He finishes his coffee and hands the cup to Clay. “Refill, please.”

Clay does as is told, returning to find Phil poring over the documents again.

When his two hours are up, Phil hands Clay his pay, and Clay decides to head on home. However, he can't help but worry about Phil.

*

7/12 – SUNDAY – EVENING

“Oh, hey, Clay!”

Clay turns around at the call of his name, finding Smith running up to him.

“Hi, Smith.”

“You wouldn't believe it,” Smith says, breathless. “I got past the preliminary rounds. For the Hackathon!”

That must be the hacking or coding competition that Smith had participated in, the one that he's determined to win for his brother. “Congratulations!”

“I already told Tommy – uh, that's my friend – about it, but I think you should know as well,” Smith says. His gaze drifts to something behind Clay, and he shouts. “Blade, sir!”

The man in question, Blade who just happens to be passing by, flinches and ducks his head, striding over to them with a kind of urgency. First off, why does Smith call him “sir”? And second, how is it that all his friends seem to know each other.

“Smith. I would appreciate it if you kept your yelling to a minimum.”

“I was just excited to tell you, sir.”

“Don't call me sir. And tell me what?”

“You two know each other?”

“Yeah,” Smith says. “My dad works at the TV station, so we've met a couple of times when Blade sir goes on TV.”

“What was that about calling me ‘sir’?” Blade shakes his head. “You wanna go to Taco Bell? I don't wanna stand out here and just...” He glances around and drops his voice. “People are going to see me.”

Right. Blade has an issue with privacy, given his numerous appearances on television nowadays. Especially since all he talks about is the Phantom Thieves, who have been growing in popularity.

“Sure, let's go,” Smith says. His eyes dart from Clay to Blade. “Wait, how do *you* two know each other?”

“TV,” Blade says simply, already walking off towards the Taco Bell by the station entrance, with Smith skipping behind him, Clay following with his hands tucked in his pockets.

The Taco Bell is noisy, noisy enough for them to slip in quietly and find a booth by a corner by the glass windows, giving them a good view of the Sunday evening scene.

Clay orders for them, and Blade pays. Smith sits restlessly in his seat, leg bouncing. As they wait

for their order, Blade asks, “What did you want to say?”

“So, I got past the preliminary round,” Smith says. “Of the Hackathon.”

“Good job.”

“Right! So the thing is that we’re going to go into the semi-finals soon, and then if I manage to move up again, we’re going to be able to get into the finals.”

“For Toby, correct?” Clay asks.

“Yeah,” Smith says with a forlorn smile. “We promised that we’d win together. Now that he’s gone, I gotta win for the both of us.”

Blade purses his lips. Clay hears their number called and heads on over to the counter to collect their order. When he returns, Smith is talking enthusiastically, showing Blade something on his phone.

[“Oh, that’s right.”](#) Did you hear about the incident with the Phantom Thieves?” Smith asks. “The one about that mafia guy?”

“It was all over the news,” Clay says, nodding.

“What about them?” Blade asks.

Smith chuckles. “You don’t sound so happy about that.”

“Well, I’m supposed to investigate them,” Blade says, shrugging. “Now people are starting to denounce me on Twitter. Instagram. Anywhere, really.” He sips his coffee.

“But they took down a bad guy,” Clay says. “An actual, legitimate criminal.” He coughs. “Not to say that everyone else wasn’t a criminal.”

“And now the public perceives them to be heroes,” Blade says. He places the cup on the table. “Smith, I’d like to ask you a question.”

“Hmm?”

“What do you think about the Phantom Thieves?” Blade asks.

“The Phantom Thieves?” Smith bites down into his taco, a piece of lettuce dropping to the wrapper below. “I mean, I think it’s good that they’re helping others, but I don’t think they’ll do us any good in the long run.”

Clay raises a brow. “Why not?”

“Because, well, I think if the Phantom Thieves continue doing what they’re doing, then we’re going to start depending on them,” Smith says. “And when we start depending on them, society isn’t going to put in the effort to progress.”

Clay has never thought of it that way. Still, does that mean that they should stop what they’re doing?

“Interesting point of view,” Blade says, nodding.

“Yeah.” Have they only been thinking of short-term goals?

“Oh, but I’m not trying to offend anyone,” Smith says quickly. “What I mean to say is-“

“No, it’s fine,” Clay assures him. “I think that’s a valid response.”

The three of them eat in relative silence, the rest of the crowd loud enough to compensate. At the end of the meal, the three of them part ways at the station.

“Do you regret becoming our leader?” Floris asks, poking his head out from the bag. Clay almost forgot that he is in there. He sounds almost...worried.

“Nah. We helped people. Our schoolmates, Marion’s students, people threatened by the mafia...” Clay clucks his tongue. “I think we’re doing good.”

“When Smith said that it’s not sustainable in the long run...”

“He’s got a point,” Clay says, dropping his voice as he gets on the train. “And I don’t think that we can last forever, but we’ll cross the bridge when we come to it.”

Floris hums, but he does not lose that concerned tone. He wriggles his way back into the bag and does not speak the rest of the way back.

*

Chapter End Notes

Temperance arcana rank 8 -> 9 (joel)
Guts +2 (clinical trial)
Death arcana rank 3 -> 4 (tommy)
Moon arcana rank 4 -> 5 (cheng)
Hierophant arcana rank 6 -> 7 (phil)
Proficiency +3 (working at gun shop)

School's Torture

Chapter Summary

well the title says it all

SHORT CHAP COS I ACCIDENTALLY POSTED IT

Chapter Notes

im so friggin tired why the heck do profs just give us 1 day to do group projects and like release our homework at 10pm at night when we have lesson at 10am in the morning

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

7/13 – MONDAY – MORNING

“Have you gone for Dr Montgomery’s counselling?”

Clay blinks. Eret jogs up to him, bag slung over his shoulder. “Yeah.”

“You actually go for that?” Nick scratches his nose.

“It’s okay,” Clay says. “I’ve gone a couple of times now. You don’t have to talk to her about anything you’re uncomfortable about.”

“Maybe I should try it, then,” Eret says. “I’ve thought about going, but never found the time.”

“She’s quite useful. I mean, since the Metaverse is all about cognition,” Floris says, climbing up onto Clay’s shoulder. “Though, I think we should care about our studies first. Maybe you can go after exams.”

The rest of the walk to school is nothing more than Clay reciting random history facts, bits and pieces that he remembers from the textbook, much to Eret’s disappointment and Nick’s unstoppable laughter.

*

7/13 – MONDAY – AFTERNOON

Describe the origin of the baozi.

Clay remembers that they’ve gone through this in class...once. Vaguely. Something about heads. Oh, and it was kinda violent too. And it involved some Chinese guy.

When Clay hands the paper in, he isn’t feeling too confident about it. Darryl whirls around in his seat and asks how he did, but the only sound Clay can muster is a defeated groan.

*

7/14 – TUESDAY – MORNING

“Can I call you Tubbo instead?”

“Huh? Oh, sure. I mean, I don’t mind.”

Clay hums. The two of them head on over to their classrooms. “You have exams today?”

“Yeah,” Tubbo says. “It’s Lit, and I’m no good at Lit.”

“Same here.”

“Really? You look like a Lit kind of person,” Tubbo says, tilting his head. “I guess you shouldn’t judge a book by its cover.” He waves to Clay, heading towards his classroom as Clay makes his way up the stairs.

The classroom is deathly silent when Clay walks in. Nearly everyone has their books out, doing last minute revision before their exams. Is this what they call culture shock?

Clay gingerly moves to his seat, settles down and proceeds to plant his face against the table.

*

7/15 – WEDNESDAY – LUNCHTIME

“What was your answer for that question?” Darryl asks.

“Which question?”

“The one about the metaphor?”

“‘Raining cats and dogs’,” Nick says, stabbing at his meatball with a fork.

Clay claps. “I got that one right.”

“Is it just us four today?” Floris asks, glancing around. “Where’s Eret?”

“Gone for that counselling thing or something,” Clay says. “Tomorrow’s the last day of exams, after all.”

“Smartass. Doesn’t need to study and shit,” Nick sighs, chewing into his meatball.

“Don’t curse.” Darryl nudges him.

Clay stares out at the football field, at the big, fat raindrops as they fall from the skies above.

Chapter End Notes

i always love to do tests and answer teacher's questions in persona cos it's like playing

one massive trivia game

Eret's Welcome

Chapter Summary

welcoming party for eret

Chapter Notes

my :O face when i accidentally clicked "post chapter" when i tried to save the prev chap

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

7/16 – THURSDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“Exams are over,” Clay mumbles, sounding and looking very much like a shambling corpse. “God, exams are over.”

“Right,” Floris says. “Exam week is always so boring.” His tail swishes. “All you do is study, study and study some more.”

“At least *you* don’t have to take exams.”

“What can I say? I’m a fox.”

“You’re only a fox when it’s convenient!”

“Clay!”

Clay recognizes that voice anywhere. He spins on his heels to find George running up to him.

“Do you want to come to a summer festival with me? It’s, like a food festival. With all sorts of summer food.”

Clay ignores Floris’ guffaws from within his bag. It takes all he has for his jaw not to just drop all the way to the ground. Did George just ask him out on a date? “*With me*”, he said. “*With me*.”

“Yeah, sure.” No matter how excited he is on the inside, no matter how fast his heart is fluttering, the reply must always be calm.

“Great,” George says, flashing his most dazzling smile. “I’ll meet you at Lara Stadium, then. Is nine in the afternoon alright?”

Where the hell is Lara Stadium? “Tomorrow?”

“Oh, no. It’s on Saturday,” George says, scratching his head. “Sorry for such a short notice...”

“It’s cool. I’m totally free.”

George thanks him, once more with that bright smile, and heads off first. Apparently, he promised Gina, his sister, that he would buy her that new motherboard for her computer. Clay stands there, still a little stupefied by the fact that the one who seems to be initiating all these dates happens to be George.

*

7/16 – THURSDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“Clay? May I speak to you for a second?”

Montgomery walks up to Clay, her white coat flouncing around her hips, clipboard in hand.

“Sure,” Clay says. He was on his way to the gardening club room, but he’ll have to tell Niki he’d pass today. He follows Montgomery over to her counselling room, the familiar smell of tea and biscuits filling the air.

“The weather’s started heating up,” Montgomery says, fanning herself once she’s seated down on the couch. “My electricity bill’s going to climb.”

Clay sits himself down and grabs a granola bar, crunching into it, the sweet and sour tang of strawberries gracing his tongue. He declines Montgomery’s offer of tea, however.

“I’m curious about your thoughts, Clay,” Montgomery says, “on a new line of thinking I had had.”

“What is it?”

“What if there is a person, hypothetically speaking, of course, who shoulders the burden of terribly high expectations?” Montgomery asks, leaning forward, “and then fail to meet them?”

“They’d be disappointed.”

“Indeed,” Montgomery says, nodding. “But what about those people who held the high expectations? What do you think they’ll feel?”

“Um...” Clay attempts to put himself in their shoes. The shoes of his fellow Thieves. “They’ll be disappointed too?”

Montgomery giggles. “I suppose.” Her smile fades, and she leans back against the couch. “As a counsellor, thoughts such as ‘I need to help this person so that they won’t feel heartbreak’ occasionally crosses my mind. However, reality is cruel. Sometimes, even know I know I need to help people, I’m not sure what I should do even if the root cause of the problem is known to me.”

“Yeah, it’s not possible to help every single person on this earth...”

“While that may be true now, perhaps all we need is a fundamental solution,” Montgomery says. She relaxes her fingers around her teacup.

“A fundamental solution?”

“Something like...hmm...” Montgomery places her cup back onto the saucer. “Something like... asking the Phantom Thieves to change our hearts? That’s what they’ve been going around and doing, right?”

Clay straightens his shoulders. “Yeah.”

“Maybe they can change our hearts so that we no longer have to live in this unfair reality. They deliver us from what gives us sorrow, so that we may live in eternal bliss,” Montgomery says. “How does that sound?”

“Is that really a change of heart, though? Sounds a little different from what I’ve heard they’ve been doing.”

Montgomery clasps her fingers together in front of her. “It seems not, now that I think about it.” She stares at the ground thoughtfully, then stands. “I think I’ve kept you far too long. You should get going for home.”

Clay stands, heaving his bag up onto his shoulder. Montgomery waves with a cheery smile, which Clay returns.

“Enjoy your vacation!”

*

7/16 – THURSDAY – EVENING

“I think your skills are getting sharper,” Mrs Armstrong says, tasting the broth that Clay had just whipped up. “It’s not tasting so bland anymore.”

Clay scoops up a little of the soup, blowing on it before lapping it up. Well, he can taste *something* at least. A sort of sourness characteristic of the tomato. It’s better than the pasta that he tried to make a couple of dinners ago.

“Yeah, it’s not.”

Mrs Armstrong adds the noodles, the small pieces of macaroni dropping into the soup with tiny “plop”s.

“Clay, would you mind if I asked you something...that’s been on my mind recently?”

What’s this about? “Sure.”

Mrs Armstrong turns the fire down, the crackling noise getting softer and softer. She covers the simmering pot of minestrone with a lid.

“What would you do if someone who betrayed you suddenly walked back into your life?” Mrs Armstrong asks. “Someone you gave your whole heart to?”

“Well...” Clay leans against the counter. He’s never been in that position before, and hopefully never will be. “It depends on whether I still care about them.”

“What if you still do? What happens then?”

“Then it depends on whether they still care about me.”

Mrs Armstrong goes quiet at this. She lifts the lid of the pot and a cloud of steam billows out. She pokes at a macaroni with a fork, then places the lid back on.

“I see,” Mrs Armstrong says, shaking her head. “What if they still care?”

“Then I’ll...try to fix things,” Clay says, shrugging. “And if they really cared, they’ll try too.”

The pasta is done, and the two of them split the minestrone into three bowls. Nick saunters down from the floor above, grabbing the cutlery to set the table. They migrate to the dining table and have a near-silent dinner, atmosphere heavy.

“So, what were you and my mom talking about?” Nick asks.

“Huh? Oh, uh...about betrayal.”

Nick seems to get the hint as they retreat to their rooms.

“What do you think about the whole thing?” Clay asks.

“About what?”

“Your mom and dad.”

“Oh.” Nick scratches his head. “I mean, if they’re not happy being together, then it’s best that they don’t get back together, you know what I mean? I don’t want them to get back together solely for my sake.”

Clay hums. Nick boots his computer up, the CPU whirring loudly.

“So, yeah. That’s my take on it,” Nick says. “Of course, no matter what happens I’m gonna support my parents.”

“That’s, like, the most mature thing I’ve ever heard you say.” Clay laughs, prodding at Floris’ sleeping body curled up on his pillow. Floris stirs, his tail slapping Clay’s cheek.

“Oh shut up.”

[Clay’s phone buzzes](#), indication light blinking. He glances at his illuminated screen, a notification for the Phantom Thieves’ chatlog appearing.

Zak: Oi lets hold the celebration tomorrow

Zak: im boredyyyyyy

Darryl: im up for that

Me: food. Also not sure whether I told u guys but I got 50 bucks for the casing

*Me: 500**

“If that thing was only worth fifty bucks I’ll be really, *really* sad.” Nick chortles.

Eret: How about this place at Beatty?

Eret: Beside a darts and billiards club

Me: I think we got banned from that

Darryl: no we didn’t

Nick: spill

Nick: the

Nick: tea

Darryl: floris caused a minor inconvenience is all

Zak: lmao

Me: “minor”

Eret: so is that a no?

Me: quite sure they don't rmb r us its been forever since we went

Zak: tmr I'll meet u guys at beatty station ok

Darryl: yeah sure

Me: k

Eret: alright

Nick: can

Clay switches his phone off and places it on the shelf. Nick goes back to playing his shooting game, and Floris remains snoring beside Clay's head.

*

7/17 – FRIDAY – MIDNIGHT

Clay is rudely awoken with a kick to his face. He stifles a yelp and gets up, only to find Floris huddled in a corner, tail curled around himself, tiny body shaking.

All the frustration built up in that one second dissipates. “Hey, you okay?”

Floris, for the first time, looks incredibly vulnerable, body blending in perfectly with the dark. His lime green eyes, the window to his soul, swirls with more fear than one can ever put into words.

“I'm fine.”

“That's bullshit and you know it,” Clay says. He lifts his blanket, and Floris slinks towards the tiny alcove carved in the bed, ears flattened against his head.

“I'm human, right?”

“Of course.”

“What if I'm not?”

“Well, you're not getting rid of us that easily,” Clay says, “if that's what you're worried about.”

Floris remains silent. He snuggles into Clay's chest, soon fast asleep, back rising and falling evenly. Clay shuts his eyes, an arm thrown over Floris, and soon is lulled back to a dreamless sleep.

*

7/17 – FRIDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“Steak is always good.”

“Personally, I prefer fish.”

Clay pokes at Floris’ snout with the steak, and Floris snaps it up, returning his attention to the ongoing darts game, tail wagging in excitement, yipping restlessly when one of the participants scores a bulls-eye.

Clay stabs a piece of Eret’s salmon and shoves into his mouth.

“Hey.”

“Floris is eating half my share and I’m a growing boy.”

“I’m only a year older than you!”

“This is well below five hundred bucks,” Nick says, “but man is the food good. We should come here more often.”

“This is a fucking forty-minute train ride from our house!” Clay cries.

“Language!”

“And a twenty-minute journey from school.”

The rest of the dinner is lively, snarky remarks thrown here and there, food theft rampant. Floris suggests they try a darts game after dinner, clearly enamoured by the idea, and Eret gets surprisingly into it as well.

“Robin Hood!” For a moment, Clay can almost see the Persona flickering behind Eret, can almost see the line of light trailing after the dart reminiscent of Robin Hood’s arrows of light.

“OH SHIT!” Clay and Nick whoop and cheer as Eret’s dart stabs the middle of the board, and he and Zak win the round.

“Language, but yeah!” Darryl yelps as Zak envelopes Eret in a bear hug.

When they split that day at the Valentine Hills interchange, Clay has never laughed so loudly in his life, never had this much fun, never wanted to *not* leave.

He doesn’t want to lose what he has now. Ever. No matter what.

Chapter End Notes

Empress arcana rank 6 -> 7 (mrs armstrong)

Fortune arcana rank 3 -> 4 (Fundy)

The New Threat

Chapter Summary

the new threat presents itself + gogy date 2.0

Chapter Notes

writing during my tutorial lolll it was boring

my prof explaining the reproductive system has me in stitches i swear i have to pause the recording every 5 mins to laugh my ass off

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

7/17 – FRIDAY – EVENING

Cheng: [link](#)

Me: *what that*

Cheng: *just read it!! Its baddddd*

Clay rolls onto his back and opens up the link. It brings him to a hideously green website, the giant name “MEDJED” splashed onto the screen, depicting their “Announcements” page.

The Phantom Thieves, who have newly risen to fame, have wreaked havoc on our state, doing as they please with no regard for the safety of the public. Let them continue, and their influence will spread to our entire country. We declare war on the Phantom Thieves, which will take place in a month’s time on the 21st of August, to stop them and their tyranny.

Our terms are simple: The Phantom Thieves have to unmask themselves and reveal their identity to the public. Moreover, they must not resist arrest. Failure to comply will result in the cleansing of the citizens of the United States of America. The information we release to the world will destroy the economy, the welfare of the people and will, in essence, cause destruction to the American society.

We are Medjed. We are unseen. We eliminate evil.

What the fuck? Clay quickly forwards the link to the Phantom Thieves’ group. Who the fuck is Medjed? And why does this Medjed group want them to reveal their identities?

Clay delves into their website, his phone screen glowing brightly in the dark of the room. There’s hardly any information on them – only their motto: *We are Medjed. We are unseen. We eliminate evil*, their About: Vigilantes of the Digital Age and a list of companies that they had taken down with their hacking skills.

His phone buzzes and a chatlog notification catches his attention.

Darryl: Just who did we make an enemy out of?

Great question.

Eret: This is worrying

“What’s wrong?” Floris asks, curling up on Clay’s chest, angling his face up to look at the phone.

“We have a new enemy.”

Upon reading the announcements, Floris’ face is a mixture of concern and disgust.

[“Maybe](#) we’re getting a little too famous,” Clay says, sighing.

“Don’t think of it that way,” Floris scolds. “We’re doing this for our own justice, right? Because the authorities don’t care about injustices, so we have to exact our own.”

Clay plugs his phone into the charger. “Yeah, you’re right. If we didn’t start the Phantom Thieves, then people like Zak, people like Darryl...they’re all still going to be in pain.”

“So don’t worry too much about it,” Floris says. “We can discuss with the team tomorrow.”

“I have a date, though.”

“After, then.”

Me: lets meet up tmr to discuss this

Me: is evening ok for u guys

Darryl: im visiting Adrian though

Darryl: I can come at around six

Zak: yeah I can make it

Eret: same here

Nick: yeah

Darryl: Where we meeting?

Zak: diner? Usual place

Nick: we shld just make that place our hideout now

Me: sounds good

“We’re not going to take this lying down,” Floris says, as Clay switches his phone off. The door opens, and Nick walks in with a towel around his neck, his hair dripping with water. “We’re going to put up a good fight.”

“Oh, you mean Medjed?” Nick asks as he dries his hair. “Dude, it’s friggin’ scary, but if you think about it, it’s also really cool. We’re famous enough for this big, weird organization to target us.”

“Yeah, it’s definitely going to draw attention to us,” Floris says. “We’re going to have to be more careful about our Phantom Thieves’ activities from now on.”

Nick decides to stay up for a little longer, scrolling through Twitter, while Clay rolls onto his side and falls asleep in a matter of minutes.

*

7/18 – SATURDAY – DAYTIME

“Do you prefer chicken chop or omelette?”

“Uh...” George glances from one stall to the other. “We just ate some pork so probably omelette.”

The festival is a blast, with the two of them just walking around and eating grilled omelettes, cups o’ chicken and shaved ice with fruit-flavoured syrup, talking about everything and nothing at the same time. The sun is really starting to scorch the earth by the time midday rolls around, the heat radiating from the ground beneath them through the soles of their shoes.

“It’s getting really hot, isn’t it?” George says, fanning himself as he bites into a cheesy corndog.

“Yeah. It’s terrible.”

“Sorry, can we find some shade? I’m a little sensitive to heat.”

They decide to hide under the overhang of the Lara Stadium train station, giving them an excellent view of said stadium still under renovation. “How are you spending your summer vacation?”

“Uh...” *Probably doing Phantom Thief activities.* “I haven’t thought about it yet.”

“Then do you want to hang out more?”

“Sure!” Clay hopes he didn’t sound too desperate there.

George flashes him a smile so bright that it rivals the sun. “Great! Maybe we can go to the beach or something. That’s what people do during summer, right? And we can invite your friends. They seem like a friendly bunch.”

Well, it’s probably worth it to get teased if Clay can see George shirtless. That, and any trip with the boys would probably be really fun.

“Is that Clay?”

“Oh my God, it’s the big man!”

Clay recognizes those voices, especially one of them, *anywhere*.

“Are those your friends?” George asks.

“Yeah...somewhat,” Clay says, scratching his head. “One of them’s really sweet. The other’s kind of annoying. Kind of amazed they’re friends.”

George chuckles. “I can sort of tell who is who.”

“What are you doing here?” Tommy asks, chomping into his hotdog bun.

“Is this your boyfriend?” Tubbo asks.

“What?” Clay splutters. “No. We’re just friends.”

“Huh.” Tubbo looks unconvinced.

“Dre,” Tommy says, stuffing the last bit of his burger into his mouth. “I hate to break it to you, but you’re a pussy.”

George bursts into uncontrolled laughter and Clay splutters, ears reddening considerably. Uncomfortably so. “What?”

“Tough men figure it out themselves,” Tommy says as a matter-of-factly. “Anyway, what’s that big thing over there?”

“The Stadium,” Tubbo says.

“I heard it used to be a research lab,” George says. “Then they tore it down to build the stadium.”

“It was some kind of facility that combined technology and psychology,” Tubbo says. “My brother and I used to go for competitions and stuff there. Then they basically demolished it.”

“Competitions and stuff? You’re into computers?” George asks, sounding intrigued.

“Yeah,” Tubbo says, brightening up. “You too?”

“Somewhat. I’m thinking of studying that in college.”

“Oh, same!”

“This is the part where I zone out,” Tommy says. “Because I don’t understand shit about computers.”

Clay has to agree. He ends up chatting with Tommy about other people, like Blade and Wilbur, and their recent examinations, what they’re going to do during the summer holidays...

When Clay next glances at his phone, it’s already one p.m. And one message from an unknown number. He’ll respond to it later.

“I’ll talk to you soon, George!” Tubbo says. “Tommy, we gotta go now.”

“Oh yeah, your hacking shit.”

“I’ll see you too,” George says, slipping his phone back into his pocket. Tommy and Tubbo head off first, toward the station.

“Well then, shall we split up for today?” George says. “I don’t know about you, but I’m stuffed.”

“What? With your chocolate raisins?”

“Hey. It was a good deal.”

Laughter between them comes easy. They make their way to the bus stop, which Clay realizes takes him to Valentine’s faster. His bus comes first, and he waves goodbye to George.

“Say hi to Gina for me.”

“Sure thing.” George waves to him from outside the bus, and Clay finds a seat on the second floor. He settles down and the bus begins to move off, bringing him back to the heart of the city.

7/18 – SATURDAY – EVENING

“Sorry I’m late!”

Darryl joins them at their booth. The diner is packed at this time of the day, the noise just under an unbearable volume, ideal for having a top-secret conversation about Phantom Thief activities.

“It’s fine. We just got here,” Clay assures him.

Darryl goes to order his dinner and returns with a receipt with his queue number.

“Okay, so let’s go over what we know,” Floris says, front paws on the table. “So, I take it that everyone’s read that announcement by Medjed?”

“Yeah,” Zak says. “What’s up with that?”

“They’re a highly-confidential group of hackers,” Eret says. “They take down big conglomerates by leaking private info. Well, big conglomerates that have actually committed crimes.”

“So they’re like us. But with computers,” Nick says.

Floris snorts. “Yeah, something like that. So, does anyone have a plan?”

The buzzer rings overhead, and Eret stands up to go get his food, returning with a steaming burrito. Clay unlocks his phone and opens it up to a chat log, placing it on the table.

“You got a plan?” Zak looks surprised.

“Just read it.”

Unknown number: Good afternoon

Unknown number: You are the leader of the Phantom Thieves, are you not?

Unknown number: I have a heart I need you to steal

Unknown number: I’ve seen the threat that Medjed has made on you and your group.

Me: Who are you?

Unknown number: That’s not important.

Unknown number: If you can steal their heart, then I will take care of Medjed for you.

Unknown number: Tomorrow, at this time, you will receive whatever you need in your mailbox.

Unknown number: I look forward to your success

Me: Wait, who are you?

<Error: Message not sent>

“What the heck?” Zak snatches up the phone.

“Yeah, we thought it was weird too,” Nick says. “We don’t even know anything about this

person.”

“And now they’re uncontactable,” Clay says.

“But they’re willing to help us deal with the Medjed threat,” Darryl says. The buzzer rings again and Nick, Clay and Zak head to the counter to retrieve their dinners.

“We’re out of our element in a lot of ways,” Eret says. “We should consider all avenues of assistance that we can possibly get. This person *did* say that they will send us whatever we need to steal one’s heart...does that mean that they know our *modus operandi*?”

“No way,” Darryl says. “We’ve been really secretive about it.”

Clay hums. “I’ll let you know when I receive what they sent. In the meantime, I think we should start thinking of other ways that we can deal with this Medjed.”

“And this person too,” Floris says. “Whoever texted you. For starters, how did they know that you’re the leader? How did they get your number? Medjed is a threat, sure, but I think that this person is possibly one as well.”

That’s true. They’ll deal with it tomorrow, since they have a horrible lack of information. For now, they’ll just see how it plays out.

“Then shall we meet on Monday?” Darryl asks.

“I’ve got a Student Council meeting, though I can come if we’re meeting in the evening.”

“Sorry, I think my mom’s gonna be home.”

“Tuesday, then,” Clay says. “We’ll meet on Tuesday. Meanwhile, we should try to find out more about Medjed, if we can.”

The meal is eaten in silence, each Thief contemplative. Even goodbyes are quiet, a far cry from their usual hangouts. Clay is unable to sleep that night, not when’s he’s troubled by the breach in their privacy and the trepidation of the package that he would receive in the mail come tomorrow.

*

7/19 – SUNDAY – DAYTIME

When Clay returns from helping out at the gun store, he races immediately to the mailbox, lifting the metal flap and finding one single red-and-black card sitting inside, the Phantom Thieves’ logo staring right back up at him.

No way. Clay slips the card out flips it around, inspecting it from all angles.

“There’s nothing on it,” Floris observes.

“Maybe we’re supposed to write our message here,” Clay says. The calling card isn’t the most well-made, but otherwise, it resembles every other one that they have sent out.

“There’s nothing else, right?” Floris asks, hanging by Clay’s arm to check the mailbox. “No information on the target?”

“Not even a name.”

Clay's phone buzzes.

Unknown number: Have you received whatever I sent you?

Unknown number: I'm sure that's all you need to steal their heart.

Me: I need a name. Full name.

Unknown number: Full name? Can't you just steal someone's heart with a calling card?

Me: Not possible. I need a name.

Unknown number: ...

Unknown number: Fine. If you really need it

Unknown number: The person's full name is Gina Mavis Davidson.

[Wait.](#)

Clay knows that name. What the fuck?

Unknown number: If that's all you need

Unknown number: I expect her heart to be stolen before Medjed's deadline

Me: Are you related to George?

<Error: Message not sent>

"Damn it," Clay slams his fist against the wall. He locks his phone and stuffs it into his pocket, still looking down at the card.

Gina Davidson? Could she be...?

"We'll discuss this with the others," Clay says. He swallows thickly. "And quite possibly George."

"We don't know whether they're the same person," Floris says.

"Even so, I don't want to involve George in all this," Clay says. "I mean, it's dangerous and all, what we're doing."

Clay and Floris head back into the house. Nick is vacuuming the floor, the drone of the vacuum cleaner drilling into Clay's ears.

"Did you find the...uh, thing that the person sent you?"

"You mean this?" Clay holds the calling card up. "I hate to say it but I'm glad your mom is working right now."

"Wait, is that-?"

"Yeah," Clay says. "It's a calling card, but there's nothing on it."

"Okay." Nick takes a sharp breath. "You got a name?"

"Yeah. Gina Davidson."

“Gina? Never heard of her.”

“We think she’s George’s sister,” Floris says. “He mentioned her once or twice.”

“Are you serious?” Nick’s eyes bulge. “*George’s* sister?”

“Couldn’t believe it myself,” Clay says. He saunters over to the staircase and proceeds to make his way up to their room. “I’m gonna get ready for my tuition. We’ll let the entire team know on Tuesday.”

Clay’s thumb hovers over his chat with George. Should he send George a message, perhaps, to preempt him for any possible confrontations with his sister? Speaking of which, why does Gina need her heart stolen anyway? What has she done?

God. The sheer lack of information is killing him. Too many questions, too few answers.

The doorbell rings downstairs, and Clay gathers up his textbooks and pencil case, heading down to the dining room.

Chapter End Notes

cant wait for the festival tomorrow though its gonna be like 4am here and im just gonna dodge instagram and stuff until i finish watching one of the streams

The Mysterious Target

Chapter Summary

some s links + story

Chapter Notes

oooooooooh its almost 500 kudosses tysm everyone who gave this fic kudos ! and commented ! and read ! love yall!!

also, just realized that i never actually did mention this but here are the relative ages for MCYT chars (some characters are aged up, some are aged down...considerably):

15 years old: TommyInnit

16 years old: Tubbo_, Thunder140802/Jack Manifold

17 years old: Dream, GeorgeNotFound, Sapnap, BadBoyHalo, Skeppy

18 years old: Technoblade, The_Eret, TapL (not yet introduced but just gonna say it here first), Nihachu/Niki

19 years old: Pokimane

25 yo: Wilbur Soot, Quackity

27 yo: Smallishbeans/Joel, LDSHadowLady/Lizzie

28~29 yo: Punz, Ponk

35 yo: Phoenix SC

36 yo: Philza

Unknown: Fundy, AntFrost (also not yet introduced)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

7/19 – SUNDAY – EVENING

“Wilbur.”

“Hmm?”

“Sorry I did a little snooping around, but...” Clay holds his phone up. Wilbur’s expression goes dark which then morphs into a pronounced sneer.

“You’re disgusted by me. Is that what you want to say?”

“No,” Clay says, shaking his head. *Author of bestseller The Rules of the Earth, W. Soot, accused of plagiarism.* “I don’t even know whether it’s true.”

“True or not, it doesn’t matter,” Wilbur says bitterly. “The thing that everyone believes in will be the truth. What use is the truth when no one will believe you?”

Clay purses his lips. “Did you do it, Wilbur?”

Wilbur lets out a long, suffering sigh, turning to stare out the window. “What if I told you I did? What then?”

“I’m not gonna do anything,” Clay says, holding up his hands. “That incident was three years ago.”

“Not everyone thinks that way.” Wilbur barks out a laugh. “I had to change my email, my number...got spammed death threats on social media, spent nights sleepless for fear of my life.”

“That must have been hard.”

“You don’t say.” Wilbur sighs. “Sure, the hype surrounding it died off after a while, but the damage was done.”

“But why? Why did you-“

Anger flashes across Wilbur’s eyes. “Do you *know* the pressure I was under? The fucking deadlines I had to meet that just kept getting pushed forward? To produce something of the same quality...” Wilbur seems to catch himself, noticing the line he just crossed. “I’m sorry. I lost myself there.”

“It’s okay,” Clay says, scratching his nose. He fidgets with his phone, running his thumb up and down the length of it. “How is...how is the War of L’manburg coming along?”

“I managed to buy myself a week,” Wilbur says, shaking his head, eyes closed. “It’s due next Monday, but I’m not quite done with it.” He pulls out his own phone, opens it up to the document, and hands it to Clay. “If I can’t finish it, I may just have to abandon it altogether.”

Clay tries his hardest to focus on the new chapters, but he can’t. Not when all that’s running through his mind is Wilbur’s predicament. He must be trying to redeem himself through this next book, but with the looming deadline...

Clay snaps to attention, hoping that his thoughts on the new chapter really helps Wilbur. Now the festival preparations are over, and all that’s left is the festival itself, likely the climax of the story. Wilbur thanks him with a half-hearted smile, once more apologizing for his crude language.

“I’ll see you next week then,” Wilbur says, voice heavy with exhaustion.

Clay closes the door, and finds Floris padding up to him.

“I heard all that,” Floris says. “His deadline’s coming up soon?”

“Yeah,” Clay says. The current situation sounds oddly familiar...to Wilbur’s situation in the past.

“Something seems fishy here,” Floris says, swishing his tail. “Let’s be sure to ask him next week.”

Clay agrees. He packs his things up and heads back to his room.

*

7/20 – MONDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“I went to see Adrian yesterday.”

“Hmm? Oh yeah, you said,” Clay asks, taking a large bite out of his pizza slice. At Darryl’s request, he’s come all the way out here to Elytra to try out this new Pizza Palace that just opened. “How was he?”

“He’s gotten...better. Good enough to begin rehab.”

“That’s awesome.”

“Yeah,” Darryl says. “But I feel like...” He swirls his drink with his straw. “I feel like I haven’t been seeing him a lot lately, with everything that’s been going on.”

“I think he’ll understand,” Clay says. “You made time to see him, right?”

“Uh huh.” Darryl pauses for a while. “Oh, and uh...Zak invited me to the movies.”

“Congrats.”

Darryl shoots him a confused look. “I was gonna ask if you wanted to come.”

“Oh.” Clay shakes his head. “Nah. I don’t think Zak wanted anyone else to go. Have fun at the movies.”

“No, wait.” Darryl sighs exasperatedly. “The thing is, I was going to go meet Adrian that day, but Zak bought tickets without asking first, so...” He then laughs. “This is so funny. I’m asking whether you’d like to take my place even when we’re embroiled in...all this.”

“I don’t mind,” Clay says, though he can imagine the disappointment on Zak’s face. “Ah, but you have to tell Zak.”

“I already have, and he’s kind of pouting,” Darryl says. “Now I feel kind of bad. Like, should I have chosen Zak over Adrian? They’re both really close friends, but...”

“Well, he *did* buy those tickets without asking first.”

“That’s true,” Darryl says, smiling a little. “I guess I can make it up to him later...”

Clay gobbles up his last piece of pizza and sips his iced cocoa. “Yeah. I’m sure he’d like it.”

“Thanks,” Darryl says. “I wonder what I’d do without you man.”

They finish up their pizzas and make for home. Clay texts Zak as the train rattles along the rails. There is no immediate reply, and Clay decides to just stare out the train till they reach their stop.

*

7/20 – MONDAY – EVENING

“You want me to come?” Clay points at himself. Joel is already removing his white coat, draping it on the backrest of his chair.

“Of course. It was with your help that Lizzie is recovering,” Joel says, straightening his vest. “Come on. Visiting hours are going to be over soon.”

Joel drives them to the hospital at the edge of the town, a small, quaint place surrounded by copses of deciduous trees and radiant flowers, a tiny cobblestone path winding past a church leading further up to Creek Walk.

Lizzie’s room is small, but she is alone with nurses. She has already done away with most of the IV drips the last time Clay saw her (through a photograph), but those tubes running from her nostrils stay. There is now colour to her cheeks, the eye bags gone, her face fuller.

“Lizzie.” Joel touches her arm gently. “I’m here.”

Lizzie stirs. She blinks, bleary eyes focusing on the two faces hovering over her.

“Joel?” she mumbles, voice heavy with sleep. “Oh, and you must be...”

“That’s the kid who’s been working with me,” Joel says. He places a hand on Clay’s shoulder.

“His name is Clay.”

“Clay...hmm?” Lizzie sounds contemplative. “Thank you so much for taking care of my husband.”

“I didn’t really take care of him...”

Lizzie smiles and giggles breathlessly. “I appreciate it, Clay.”

“It’s no problem.”

“Well, it’s getting late,” Joel says. “Clay, mind waiting outside for a moment?”

Clay takes the hint and heads out, sitting himself on the cushiony bench outside. Oh, it seems that Zak has replied to his messages...

Joel emerges from the room a couple of minutes later, a content expression on his face.

“You look really happy.”

“Of course I’m happy. Lizzie’s alive, I’m promoted, and I can continue my practice...probably,” Joel says. “I literally went from the lowest point in my life to the highest. And I have you to thank.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Well...here.”

Joel drops a card fitted into a lanyard into Clay’s palm. On the card is Joel’s profile – his picture, and his name. It’s the same lanyard he usually wears when he’s in the clinic.

“I won’t be needing that anymore,” Joel says, gesturing to the lanyard. “You can keep it as a reminder of the trials we went through together.”

Clay coils the strap like rope and places it into his bag. “Thanks, Joel. I’ll probably come back to grab some medicine, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course,” Joel says. “Medicine is important when you’re going on heists, huh?”

Clay widens his eyes. “What?”

“That incident with Rivers,” Joel says, laughing. “It was strange. Too good to be true. I hadn’t thought about it till now, but what she experienced was a change of heart, wasn’t it? The only person who knows about this altercation was you.”

“Well...” Clay averts his gaze.

“Don’t worry. I don’t intend on telling anyone,” Joel says. “You help people, right? I support your justice, Mr Phantom Thief, and I’ll help you to the very end.”

I am thou, thou art I. Thou has turned a vow into a blood oath. Thy bond shall become the wings of rebellion and break the yoke of thy heart. Thou has awakened to the ultimate secret of the Temperance, granting thee infinite power...

“Would you like a ride back?”

Clay gives him a grateful smile. “Yes, please.”

*

7/21 – TUESDAY – MORNING

“I passed!” Clay cries, grabbing Nick’s shoulder as he stares at the board with their grades written on it. “I fucking passed Lit!”

“That’s...great...!” Nick splutters. “I’m *choking!*”

“You still scored the lowest, though,” Floris says, glancing over at the board with the seniors’ scores. “Holy fuck! Look at Eret’s score!”

Well, Clay hadn’t been expecting anything less. Top scorer of his level.

“He’s just unbeatable.” Nick sighs. He begins walking over to the staircase. “Come on, let’s head to class.”

*

7/21 – TUESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“So, anyone find anything?” Floris asks.

“Nope,” Zak says, popping the “p”. “Dude, there’s *nothing* on Medjed. Not even the computer science peeps at school knows who they are.”

“I did read somewhere that Medjed is actually a minor god mentioned in the Egyptian Book of the Dead, but I don’t think that it would help us very much,” Eret says.

“Yeah, our target’s not going to be some kind of god,” Floris says.

“Then what about Gina?” Darryl asks. “Clay, did you find anything out about her?”

Clay nibbles on his bottom lip. Honestly speaking, he’s too afraid to ask. “No.”

“Well, we may not need to ask George if we can figure out Gina’s distortion with this anonymous person. The one who wants her heart stolen,” Floris says. “Besides, there could be two Gina Davidsons in this city so she might not even be George’s sister...” He frowns. “I think.”

“What are the chances?” Zak says. Clay gets up to retrieve his baked potato from the counter and returns to the table. “Besides, what did this Gina person even do? Why should we steal her heart?”

Clay shakes his head. If they don’t want to depend on George, then they will have to get as much information as they can through their mysterious contact.

Clay’s phone buzzes.

Unknown number: Why has the change of heart not happened yet?

Unknown number: you have the calling card and her full name

Unknown number: are you blowing me off now?

Me: of course not

Me: we need to meet with gina

There is no immediate response.

Me: Is something wrong?

Unknown number: MUST you meet with her?

Me: yes

Unknown number: if so, the deal is off

Wait, what? Why?

Me: Why's that?

<Error: Message not sent>

“What’s their problem?” Darryl frowns.

“What happened?” Nick asks, reaching over to grab Clay’s phone. Clay hands it over and let Nick, Eret and Zak read it over.

“You shouldn’t have said ‘yes’,” Nick says. “Maybe we could find out her distortion without meeting with her.”

“I’m a little curious,” Eret says, handing Clay his phone back, “how this person seems to know Gina so well.”

“Maybe they’re a close friend.”

“But if we’re assuming that Gina is George’s sister, George did mention that she never leaves the house, not even to buy food or for school,” Floris says.

“Even if they have a close friend, I doubt that this close friend would want Gina’s heart stolen,” Eret points out. “Our targets so far have been criminals.”

“And George never said that there was anything wrong with Gina,” Clay says. “So does that mean...?”

“I’m sure,” Eret says. “The person we’re speaking to is either George or Gina herself.”

The table goes silent for a moment.

“We’re going to have to talk to George,” Floris says. “If it really is him, I have no idea how he found out about us. Well, the same goes for Gina, actually.”

“I’ll ask him tomorrow,” Clay says. “I’ll contact all of you tomorrow night.”

“Alright then,” Eret says as he rises to get his food. “Good luck.”

Clay sighs. He hadn't wanted to involve George in all this. However, they have no choice.

Not with Medjed's deadline looming over their heads.

Chapter End Notes

Tower arcana rank 6 -> 7 (Wilbur)

Knowledge +3 (tuition)

Lovers arcana rank 3 -> 4 (BBH)

Navi

Chapter Summary

george's awakening

Chapter Notes

just started watching tubbo's dreamon hunt vid

dreamsmp manburg festival spoilers:

that stream was EPIC though that moment when Tommy was like "wheres that button" and i was like "OH SHIT" and that part where TECHNO JUST KILLED TUBBO and wilburs completely off his rocker but anyway it looks like a new arc's dawning upon the dreamsmp. ive yet to watch wilbur's pov tho maybe i'll watch sometime soon

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

7/22 - WEDNESDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

“George. Can I speak to you for a moment?”

George is just packing his textbooks into his bag. He lifts his bag onto his shoulders. “Sure. Here? Or...?”

“The school gates would be best.”

George must have sensed the urgency in his voice. He presses his lips together. “Okay. Let’s go.”

The duo head out toward the school gates, passing by numerous students milling about and chatting with each other, all the while remaining silent. Clay has never spent such a quiet five minutes around George, and to be honest, it’s strange. They’ve always fallen into such easy conversation between each other, knowing exactly what to say to make the other laugh, speaking their mind without fear of judgement.

Clay leans against the wall. George folds his arms.

“What do you want to talk about?”

“I want to meet Gina.”

George furrows his brows. “Gina doesn’t meet with strangers, Clay. And you’d better not be thinking of-“

“No, it’s...” Clay runs a hand through his hair. “I think she...she messaged me.”

“She messaged you?”

“Yeah. I think so.”

George gives him a look of disbelief. “You expect me to believe that? She doesn’t even know you, much less your number. What would she even message you for?”

“It’s...” George doesn’t seem to know anything about this. About the whole messaging thing. Could it be that Eret is right? That the one who messaged them is Gina herself?

“Well...she asked me to steal her heart,” Clay says. He reaches for his phone, unlocks it and holds it out to him. George is staring at him, mouth agape.

“She asked you to *what*?”

“Steal her heart.”

“Clay, if this is a joke, it’s not funny-“

“It’s not a joke,” Clay says, waving his phone in front of George. He takes it and squints at the screen. Clay swallows, watching George intently.

“This isn’t my sister,” George says adamantly, shoving the phone back to Clay. “Gina doesn’t need a change of heart.”

“Her full name is Gina Mavis Davidson,” Clay says. “How many Gina Mavis Davidsons are there in the state?”

“I don’t know!” George raises his voice, lips pulled into a snarl. Clay flinches. “But this...this *can’t* be my sister.”

“Why not ask her?” Clay asks quietly.

“Why ask when it’s not her?”

“George-“

“And this thing about stealing her heart?” George says. “If you don’t leave her alone, I will have to report you, Clay. And your friends.”

“But George...”

“You’re the Phantom Thieves,” George says. “That’s what you’re trying to tell me, right?”

Clay’s phone lights up again. A new chat. From the unknown private number.

Unknown number: Tell George not to report you

How...?

Unknown number: Tell him it's okay

"Who is that?"

"Gina."

George snatches the phone from Clay, reading the messages on screen. "How did she—" He stares at the messages, the anger fading from his features. Clay scuffs his shoes against the pavement. George sighs and hands Clay back his phone.

Unknown number: Do not involve George in all this

Well, it's a little too late for that.

Me: Do you still want us to steal your heart, Gina?

Unknown number: I said the deal's off.

Me: actually, there might be a workaround

"What are you messaging her for?" George asks, the scowl still present on his face.

"She wants us to steal her heart," Clay says, leaning against the wall.

"But why? My sister didn't do anything wrong!"

Unknown number: what is it

Unknown number: I may reconsider retracting my offer

Clay glances around. The number of students seems to have increased. He strides past George, headed for Helen Park.

"Let's go somewhere a little more private."

*

"Gina..." has never left the house."

George sits on the bench, hands cupping his kneecaps as he sighs. "Ever since that incident, she's just been shut-in. I work to support the both of us, but..." Another long sigh. "She only ever comes out for meals and doesn't really talk to me, but still..."

George looks so distraught that Clay's heart hurts. His chest seems to constrict upon itself as he puts an arm around George's shoulders.

"How strange," George says, staring at the ground, voice cracking. "That she'd rather turn to the Thieves for help than her own brother."

Clay has no idea what to say.

"Well," George says, standing. "You wanted to meet with Gina, right?"

"Yeah," Clay says. "It would help a lot."

“I have one condition,” George says. “I want to join in on this heist as well.”

“What? But-“

“This is *my sister* we’re talking about,” George says firmly. “If you are going to steal her heart, I want to be there for that.”

“It’s dangerous, George.”

“I still can’t abandon Gina’s fate to you guys!” George hisses. “Look, I’m walking into this, *knowing* that I’m going to put myself in danger, okay?”

“You could possibly die.”

“I’d rather die helping Gina-“

“Then who would Gina have left?”

George pauses, pressing his lips together.

“I appreciate the sentiment-“

“I’m not doing it for you. Or the Thieves. I just don’t want Gina to get hurt.”

Clay nods, placing a fist over his heart. “George, I make a pledge right now, to you, that I will keep Gina safe.”

George still looks apprehensive, from the way he chews on his bottom lip, his fists clenching and unclenching.

“Okay,” George says, and lets out a shaky breath. “Okay. Come on. My home’s not too far away.”

The tension in the air is terribly uncomfortable. Clay itches to speak; he wants to comfort George, to assure him again and again, as many times as it takes, that they will never hurt the person he cares about the most. His words are stuck in his throat, his voice rendered useless. All he can do is follow George onto the train that chugs its way down the rails, headed for the Davidson residence.

*

[George](#) lives in a maisonette near Elytra, a two-storey cosy place on the fifth floor of a block of apartments. The place smells of flowers and is well-furnished. A coatrack stands by the entrance, an azure rug laid out on the ground. George kicks off his shoes.

“You can put your bag on the couch,” George says. “Is the fox with you?”

“Yeah.”

“Sorry, Gina’s a little allergic to fur...so,” George mumbles.

“I guess I’ll just stay here then,” Floris mutters. “Clay, you just need to get the venue and the possible distortions out of her, okay?”

Clay hums as he and George lay their bags down on the couch. George leads him to the second floor, the floral scent disappearing almost immediately, replaced with a certain musky odour. There are only two rooms on this floor – one right at the end of the cramped corridor, and a door opening into the side.

“That’s Gina’s room,” George says, jabbing a finger at the door at the very end. “It’s probably locked, but I’m sure you wouldn’t try to force your way inside.”

“Absolutely not.”

George walks up to the door and raps his knuckles on it.

Right away, Clay’s phone vibrates.

Unknown number: I thought I told you not to involve George

“It’s fine, Gina,” George says. “I’d rather be in the know.”

Unknown number: fine

Unknown number: what do you want

“I’m going to verbally ask the questions,” Clay says. “Essentially, we’ll need information.”

Unknown number: What kind of information?

“Firstly, you don’t exactly leave your house, do you?”

“She doesn’t,” George says, frowning. “I thought I told you already.”

Unknown number: shut up George

Unknown number: I stay here all day every day

“What do you think of this place?”

Unknown number: what do you mean?

“What do you see this place as?”

“Clay, I-“ George starts.

Unknown number: George, I can answer for myself

Unknown number: this place is

Unknown number: scary

“How so?”

Unknown number: I think im going to die here

Alarm bells ring in Clay’s head, but he schools his expression, keeping himself calm. George has a troubled look on his face. His entire body is tensed, nostrils flaring as he sucks in a sharp breath.

“So you see this place as...your grave?”

Unknown number: something like that

Unknown number: “tomb” would be more accurate.

Clay pulls up the Meta-Nav and types the newfound information into the boxes:

Name: Gina Mavis Davidson. Location: Riverside Maisonnets. Distortion: Tomb.

As soon as those keywords are entered, the world pulses around him, and Clay surrenders to the warped sensation as he is sucked into the Metaverse.

*

[“W-What](#) is this?”

Oh crap. Clay whirls around to find George still standing behind him in his uniform, a little out of place in dunes, a sea of sand stretching as far as the eye can see. Well, granted that Clay is not in his Phantom Thief outfit either...But damn, is it *sweltering*.

George is staring up at the main attraction of this boundless and empty desert. Said attraction appears to be a golden pyramid standing tall, the sandstone road flanked by two imposing statues, humanoid with animal heads, holding spears.

“Where *are* we?” George walks up to Clay. “What is this, Clay?”

“This is...” Clay scratches his head. “This is...uh...this is where we go when we steal hearts.”

“How did you get us here? What did you do?”

“You know that app that I used?” Clay says. “The one where I input Gina’s name?”

“Yeah.”

Clay explains how the Meta-Nav works, and how it brings them to the Metaverse, to Palaces, and the fact that there are malicious beings called Shadows roaming inside.

“So this is Gina’s Palace?” George walks up to the pyramid, standing right outside the bronze doors carved with an intricate pattern.

“Seems like it.”

“You said that a person’s Palace forms because of her twisted desires, right?” George’s Adam apple bobs nervously. “And what is *this*” – he waves his arms furiously – “supposed to mean?”

I am going to die here. Is this why Gina wants her heart stolen?

“Can we get in?” George asks, fingers gliding over the door’s engravings.

In response, the patterns glow green. The door begins to slide open, dust and sand raining down on the two of them. Clay coughs, swiping sand from his eyes and nose. When he can open his eyes once again, he is already seeing George sprinting up the staircase, feet thumping against the sandstone stairs.

“Wait, George!”

Clay makes after George, still rubbing at his tearing eyes. The doors open up to a giant chamber, a grand staircase going up, and up...and up some more. Clay reaches for a Pearl, only to realize that he’s not yet in his Phantom Thief outfit. He grits his teeth and steels his thighs as he makes the ascent, chasing after George.

His body feels heavier than usual without the magic of the Metaverse. Each breath is more laboured, each step takes more effort. By the time he catches up to George at the top of the

staircase, he's bent over and panting.

Strange, there were no Shadows on the way here. Could it be that Gina's Shadow doesn't see them as a threat?

"George...what...?" Clay starts, a hand on his chest, his heart racing erratically.

George has gone silent, staring straight at a young girl dressed in a pharaoh's outfit: a pharaoh's headdress sitting snugly on her head, silky sashes hanging from her arms, her garments dyed in the dulled of brown and silver.

She sports dark hair, her eyes a shiny golden. She stares at them emotionlessly.

"Welcome to my tomb."

"Gina-! What are you-“ George starts, taking a step forward, but Shadow Gina levitates, arms spread out. She fixes them with that same melancholic expression.

"My dear brother," Shadow Gina says, a lilt in her voice. "Why have you come?"

"It was an accident," George says, shaking his head. "But that's not the point! What are you doing here?"

"That's not the real Gina," Clay says, clapping a hand on George's shoulder. "That's just her Shadow. The ruler of this Palace."

"Ruler? What's that mean?"

"It means that this very Palace is under my command," Shadow Gina says. She smirks, a tiny upturn of her lips that sends chills down Clay's spine. She turns to Clay. "Dear leader of the Phantom Thieves. If you believe you can steal my heart, I dare you to try."

Shadow Gina fades away, and a loud crashing startles both Clay and George. Dream's outfit changes with a poof, revealing his green coat and vest, his mask once more adorning his face. God, it felt so wrong when it wasn't there.

There is no time to be dawdling. Where Shadow Gina once stood is now replaced with a giant stone ball, covered in glowing lines of green. It starts its rolling descent down the staircase, spraying sand everywhere. Dream grabs George's hand drags him away, down the stairs, taking two at a time.

The boulder chases them, creaking and screeching, its overbearing presence forcing Dream to run faster, to work his thighs harder. George yelps, tripping on a crack and falling forward, hands thrown in front of him to break his fall. Dream is quicker and scoops George into his arms.

Dream hurls himself into a small alcove, tucking George closer to his chest. His back slams into the wall, pain arrowing up his spine. He winces, cracking one eye open to see the giant boulder rolling past them, disappearing into thin air once it makes contact with the entrance with no more than a near-inaudible thud.

Dream is heaving, thighs and calves burning with the exercise. It's only when he registers a pressure against his breast that he realizes, with mortification, that he still has George clutched tightly to him.

"Oh God," Dream releases him immediately. "I'm so sorry. Oh God-"

“It’s...it’s fine,” George says, shaking his head. He stands, a little wobbly on his feet. “That was... do you have to go through that every time?”

“Not exactly,” Dream says, grimacing. “But similar.”

George frowns. He dips his head as he walks towards the pyramid entrance. Dream glances back at the staircase that they had just descended. Blocking off their access is a moss-coloured gate that extends all the way to the ceiling, a green jewel set into its middle, illuminated lines extending from it to the walls.

It appears that Shadow Gina now sees them as threats. Still, it makes Dream wonder why, since it was Gina who wanted them to steal her heart in the first place.

Dream follows George out into the open space of the desert. George has an arm shielding his eyes from the harsh sunlight. Dream’s hood flutters. When did it get so windy?

“What’s that up there?”

George points at a silhouette flying in the air, squinting against the bright rays.

The shape seems to be getting nearer and nearer, wings bigger and bigger. It takes Dream way too long to realize that whatever *that* is, patrolling the skies of the pyramid, is nothing good.

The silhouette belongs to a monster. A monster with a woman’s head and a lion’s body, wings beating powerfully, stirring up currents of wind. She screams, or roars, something unintelligible. Dream tenses, bracing himself against the whirlwind she whips up.

“George! Get out of the way!”

The winged sphinx misses them, thankfully, her enormous body soaring past their heads. She flies towards the pyramid, circling its perimeter.

“I know that face!” George cries, turning to stare at the apex of the pyramid where the sphinx is perched. Her menacing form resembles that of a lion eyeing its prey, waiting for the perfect moment to pounce. “That’s our mother!”

“Your mother?”

“What’s she doing here? And why’s she a sphinx?”

“George, get back,” Dream says, tugging at his wrist. The sphinx bellows, nearly rupturing Dream’s eardrums. Is she the guardian of this place?

“But what’s my mother doing there?”

[“She’s](#) become an abomination. Because of you and Gina.”

Wait...? Did George just respond to himself? Dream spins on his heels, finding another version of George standing there, arms folded, a leopard skin hanging from his shoulder, exposing his stomach, a light, satin-like cloth hanging from his waist.

This George radiates malice, eyes a raging golden. He wears a perpetual smirk, a crimson aura spilling from his pores.

“Gina’s falling victim to her guilt,” Shadow George says, “as she should. It was *us* and Gina who drove our mother to suicide, after all. Remember the fire? The flames of hatred that consumed

everything we knew and loved?”

“What are you saying?” George retorts.

“I’m saying,” Shadow George leerily, “that we are the reason that our mother has become what she is now. An uncaring monster who chose to abandon her children.”

“I refuse to believe this,” George says, a pained expression on his face, averting his gaze from his Shadow. Shadow George cackles.

“We are nothing more than a nuisance to our mother. As was Gina. We were never meant to be born. We were mistakes. We were-“

“Stop it!” George shouts, hands flying up to his temples, fingers curling into his hair. “Stop saying that!”

“Are you shying away from the truth?”

“It’s not true!” George strides up to his Shadow, grabbing him by the collar. His Shadow does not flinch, the condescending smirk still on his face. “You take that back right now, or I swear-“

“This is exactly why our mother went insane,” Shadow George says. “You are always like this. So rash. Never thinking things through. Alw-“

“Shut up!” George socks his Shadow across the face. Blue flames erupt from where he stands. “Shut up! You don’t know shit! You-“

An image of a spaceship flickers behind George, a spaceship lined with green. It fades as quickly as it comes.

“Why do you deny me so vehemently?” Shadow George asks. Black substance oozes from between his lips, staining his teeth black. “I am you, and you are me, George.”

“Get the fuck out of my head! You’re not me!”

Shadow George laughs maniacally and he begins to morph, to change shape. Dream moves to defend George, but it seems that there is no need to. A blue pillar of flames surrounds George, the spaceship, his Persona, finally begins to take form.

[Why](#) contain it any longer? Why subject yourself to the mindless words of an illusion?

Tendrils of tentacles slither from within its body, curling around George’s arms and legs. George’s uniform disappears, replaced with a sky-blue shirt, a red rectangle materializing in front of him. Brown pants cover his legs, and brown shoes cover his feet.

You know the truth in your own soul. The reason your mother died has nothing to do with you nor the people you care about.

A pair of thick white goggles are strapped to his head, his eyes hardly visible through the black glass at the ends.

Contract...I am thou, thou art I. The forbidden wisdom has been revealed. No mysteries...no illusions...shall deceive you any longer!

Dream can hardly believe it. George has a *Persona*!

The tentacles lift George up into its body, and as soon as he's inside, the Persona lifts the both of them into the air. Shadow George has already assumed his demonic form, a god with a black, canine face, wielding scales of justice in one hand, the other holding out an empty palm.

["Come](#) and get me," Shadow George says breathily. "If you can."

"Dream!" George's voice resonates from within. "I can see everything about this monster! Its weakness, its...well, everything! Dream! Mudo skill coming!"

Mudo? Dream swaps Principality out for Rakshasa in a split second. He braves the Mudo skill, beams of dark light sucking at his energy, but does not completely drain him.

"He's resetting the scales! Attack him, now! Don't use Mudo or Hama skills!"

Dream summons Orthrus, rushing Shadow George with a physical attack, the Persona's fangs snapping Shadow George by his arm. Shadow George shrieks, the scales of justice jingling as it tilts to the other side.

"He's going to use Hama!"

A flick of his wrist and Dream changes to Principality, completely dodging the Hamaon attack, careful not to get pierced by the beams of light spearing up from the ground. Principality switches for Sudama, sending waves of wind at Shadow George.

Finally, Dream changes to Setanta, his Persona leaping forth with its spear. Shadow George raises his scales to defend himself, but Setanta's spear flies clean and true, bypassing the scales and stabbing Shadow George right in the chest.

Shadow George shrieks an unholy shriek, bursting into clouds of ash, scattering in the desert wind. Dream pants, sucking down large gulps of air as his mask reappears on his face. George's Persona disappears as well, dropping him onto the ground. George lands with an "Oof!" on his butt. Dream helps him up.

["What just..."](#) George glances down at himself. "What the hell? Is that what you meant by Persona?"

"Yeah," Dream says.

"God." George attempts to stand, only to stumble. Dream grasps his upper arm, steadying him. "I'm so *tired*. I don't think I've used so much energy..."

"Yeah, it was like that for all of us too," Dream says. "Come on, let's get outta here first."

Chapter End Notes

shadow george is anubis

Pyramid of Wrath: Infiltration Begin

Chapter Summary

introducing george to the rest of the team

Chapter Notes

I FORGOT TO INCLUDE IN LAST CHAPTER NOTES paiseh paiseh:

but guys pls check out this amazing art by abcd depicting dream as joker! link:
imgur.com/a/UV2sMV6

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

7/22 – WEDNESDAY – EVENING

“So that’s what happened...” Eret mumbles.

Clay has summoned the group to the Valentine Hills train station, the group huddled against the walls of the station entrance. Zak opens a can of Monster with a pop and begins to chug it down.

“Yeah,” George says. “I would like to join you guys...if you don’t mind having me.”

“I think you’d be a great addition to the team,” Darryl says, nodding.

“George’s Persona doesn’t seem cut out for battle,” Floris says. “From what you’ve been telling me. I think he has more of a support-type Persona.”

“A support-type?”

“Yeah,” Floris says. “Basically, he’s better at scanning enemies, figuring out their weaknesses and strengths, and basically providing us defence boosts and speed boosts and stuff like that.”

“That’s cool,” Nick says. “Does that mean he can do his job better than you can?”

“What do you mean by that?” Floris bristles.

“It’s just...you haven’t been providing us much info in battle lately,” Clay says with a tilt of his head. “Or like, treasure location. Sometimes, we don’t even know how far in Mementos we are.”

“That’s because...” Floris stares at the ground. “My nose is just a little...less sensitive lately.”

“Aw, cut the guy some slack,” Zak says, tossing his finished Monster can into the nearby trash bin. It lands perfectly into the bin, hitting the bottom with a clank. “He’s doing his best.”

A hint of a smile returns to Floris’ face.

“Anyway, Floris, is it?” George asks, reaching over to pet Floris’ head. “I didn’t know you could

talk.”

“Well, I can,” Floris says. “Surprising, isn’t it?”

“We’re the only ones who can hear you speak?”

“Only people who’ve gone to the Metaverse,” Floris says, nodding, then yips happily as George scratches him behind the ears, at the spot he likes best.

“Clay, you said that you’ve already met with Shadow Gina?” Eret asks.

Clay hums in acknowledgement. “Basically, we were chased out of the pyramid, and there was this wall erected that wasn’t there before.”

“Safe to say that she has challenged us,” Eret says.

“And we’ll meet that challenge with gusto,” Darryl says. “Summer vacation begins tomorrow. If everyone’s okay with it, we can go in tomorrow?”

“As long as we can return to the real world by six,” George says. “I need to cook dinner.”

“Hey, he can cook,” Nick whispers, and Clay elbows him in the gut.

“What time will we usually meet for heists?” George asks.

“Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays. Though, we might go every day except Sunday considering that it’s the holidays now,” Clay says. “We don’t usually go on all of these days, though. We need some time to rest after an infiltration trip.”

“I see,” George says. “I know Gina, and I know that she has the capability to take down Medjed, but she’s incredibly stubborn.”

“So what you’re saying is that we have to steal Gina’s heart before she is willing to help us,” Eret says.

“Pretty much. She’s going to need a couple of hours, probably. Or a day or two. We should steal her heart by the nineteenth.”

“Nineteenth,” Clay muses. “We don’t have much time, then.”

“Just below a month,” Eret agrees. “We will go into the Palace tomorrow. Please prepare for infiltration; upgrade your weapons if you need to. Clay, would you like to grab some medicine before the infiltration?”

“Huh?” Clay blinks. “Oh. Yeah. I can do that.”

“It’s settled then,” Floris says. He smiles up at George. “Welcome to the team, George.”

[The Thieves](#) disperse. Darryl and Zak are headed to grab some treats before heading back. Nick needs to pick something up for Mrs Armstrong, not-so-gently grabbing Floris and promising that he’d get the fox back home safely. Eret leaves first, rushing back to complete a project proposal that’s due on Friday.

“Clay, I need to thank you,” George says. The sun is still high in the sky, weaving in and out of clouds that drift overhead. “For...saving me. You know, the boulder and...uh...” Red tinges the tip of his ears. “Everything. Thank you.”

“It’s no problem.” God, Clay can still feel George’s body pressed flush against his chest and the way he smelled, the- shit. He’s going to stop his train of thoughts right there.

George clears his throat. “I guess I’ll see you tomorrow, Clay. I need to go get ingredients for tomorrow’s breakfast.”

George disappears into the crowd, headed for the nearby supermarket. Clay looks up at the blue sky, listening to the white noise of people passing by. He decides to make his way to the grocery store where Nick and Floris had gone to just a while earlier.

*

7/23 – THURSDAY – DAYTIME

“First things first, what should George’s codename be?” Fundy asks, standing between the Thieves and the massive bronze doors.

“You guys have codenames?”

“Yeah,” Dream says. “I’m Dream. That’s Sapnap, Bad, Fundy, Eret and Skeppy.”

“That’s cool,” George looks excited. “Do you guys get to choose your codenames, or...?”

“Well, we kinda did,” Sapnap says, scratching his head. “You wanna choose yours?”

“You guys can choose for me,” George says. “I’m really new to this.”

“Since you’ll be our navigator, why not call you Navi?” Fundy asks. “It’s short and sweet.”

Just like the man himself, Clay thinks. “Are you okay with that, George?”

“Navi sounds good,” George says. “I’ll just be supporting you in battle, correct? With Necronomicon?”

“Yes,” Eret says. “Ergo, we will still go in a main infiltration team of four. George – ahem – Navi will accompany everyone in the main team. The backup team will take care of Shadows that attempt to strike from behind.”

“Is everyone clear on their roles?” Dream asks. There is unanimous agreement. “Then, let’s go.”

The bronze doors open with no trouble, creaking and groaning as it swings outward, revealing the same empty chamber that Dream and Navi had just left yesterday. The same green door is still there, emitting that strange green light.

Other than the towering door, something – or someone – else catches Dream’s eye. Standing before them, in front of the door, is Shadow Gina.

“That’s the Palace Ruler,” Fundy says. “Be on your guard, everyone.”

Navi approaches Shadow Gina. Once more, she holds her blank expression; it’s unnerving no matter how many times Dream sees it.

“You have come back, leader of the Phantom Thieves.” She sweeps a glance at the rest. “And it seems you have brought the rest of your group.”

“Yeah,” Dream says. “Could you please open the door up for us?”

“Perhaps,” Shadow Gina singsongs. “First, I’d like you to retrieve something that’s important to me.”

“Retrieve something important to you?”

“Indeed.” Shadow Gina glides towards the bronze doors. “Over yonder is a small village past the dunes. Only bandits reside there. One of them has stolen something of value to me. Please go and get it back from him.”

“What do you need us to retrieve?”

Shadow Gina smiles, then her image begins to fade. Well then. It looks like they have to try their luck.

“What do pharaohs find valuable?” Bad asks.

“Jewellery?” Sapnap asks.

“Probably fine art,” Skeppy says, sticking out his tongue.

“We’ll know when we get there,” Fundy says. “Come on.”

The village is a fair distance from the pyramid; it would have likely taken them hours if they walked. Dream kicks his legs up on the dashboard as Eret takes the wheel, the Fundybus speeding through the ocean of sand, making for the tiny settlement beside a calm oasis.

Most of the houses here are derelict, crumbling pieces of rubble just waiting to topple. Fraying clothes hang from clotheslines, tumbleweed rolling along the stone paths overrun with pools of sand. There is not a single person here. Not that they can see anyway.

Did Shadow Gina trick them?

“Hey.”

Someone is standing at the end of the street, waving his cutlass around like a toy. His face is covered with bandages, glowing red eyes peeking out from beneath them. He bounces from foot to foot, as if dancing to an imaginary tune.

“Don’t see new faces ‘round these parts, or faces at all, actually,” the man – or is he a Shadow? – says. “Where you come from?”

“We have no obligation to tell you,” Navi says.

“Yeah, hand over what you stole.” Dream’s hand flies to his pistol.

The bandit harrumphs, body spasming. “The pharaoh sent you, eh? Well, news flash: you’re not getting it back!”

[Wings sprout](#) from its back, silver feathers dotted with shiny jewels, its wingspan equivalent to about three Dreams. A crown perches atop its head, shimmering in the desert sun. The bird clutches something in its talons – a rolled-up piece of papyrus, held together with string fluttering in the wind.

“That is the valuable item that she was talking about,” Navi shouts. “The papyrus!”

Garuda takes to the skies, the flapping of its colossal wings so mighty that Dream is nearly blown

off his feet.

“No wind skills! Everything else is fine!”

Dream summons Setanta, spear sailing through the air aimed for Garuda. To his dismay, Garuda dodges the projectile and several fireballs. For one big bird, that thing is *fast*.

Garuda caws triumphantly and unleashes a flurry of spinning tornadoes, pillars of wind that evolve rapidly into a sandstorm, whipping up clouds of sand and dust around them. Dream thanks the gods that he’s got his mask on now.

“I got it!” Necronomicon hovers over them, a green beam of light fired at the Garuda, scanning it for its weakness... “Use your guns!”

Eret unholsters his revolver, firing a few rounds at the Garuda, each shot ringing in Dream’s ears. The bullets whizz through the air, flying right through Garuda’s feathers, between its head and wings, missing it entirely.

“Navi, mind giving us a speed boost?” Fundy shouts.

The Garuda squawks and releases yet another wave of tornadoes. This time, Dream is thrown backwards, body crashing into the wall. He coughs out sand, eyes watering. He staggers to his feet, summoning Setanta just in time to parry the bird’s razor beak, a sharp clang piercing his ears.

At this distance, he can-

Setanta pushes against the Garuda, forcing it away the same moment a green light envelopes Dream, flowing over his body like a gentle wave. Dream rolls towards its leg, body feeling like it weighs nothing more than air. He makes a grab for the papyrus...

His fingers close around it, only for it to slip through his fingers as Garuda flies upwards once more. Damn it! He was so close! Dream swaps Setanta out for Principality. Even with Navi’s speed boost, it’s not possible to...

“We’re going to have to force it into a situation where it cannot dodge our attacks,” Eret says. “Enclose it.”

Dream nods. “Bad, swap out for Skeppy!”

Bad joins Sapnap in fighting the few weakling Shadows that have gathered, while Skeppy enters the fray.

“Skeppy, can you come up with an ice dome that can encase this whole town?” Dream asks. He ducks as the bird swoops low. Any lower and Garuda would have clipped his head clean off.

“Can I...what the fuck?” Skeppy stares wide-eyed at him.

“Can you or not?”

“I-uh...you’re asking a lot.”

“I can help,” Navi says, hovering over them. Necronomicon glows red and bathes Skeppy in a cloud of orange. There must have been some change in him, because Skeppy is grinning like some kind of maniac, laughing hysterically as he slams a foot against the ground.

Ice forms where his foot meets the sand, the growing glacier freezing over houses, crystallizing

water in the air. An icy dome takes shape, forming a wall that Garuda actually rams its head into.

The chill is starting to get to him too. Dream clutches tighter at his coat. He lifts his pistol, aiming straight at a shivering Garuda, and fires. He hisses in dismay as Garuda notices and flaps its wings, dragging itself through the air away from the bullet's trajectory. However, Navi appears just in time for the bullet to ricochet off Necronomicon's shell and pierce Garuda's talon.

Garuda shrieks in agony, claw releasing its grip on the papyrus. With a boost from Eret, Fundy does a somersault, grabbing the papyrus with his tail, and landing right on Skeppy, sending the both of them sprawling onto the cold, hard ground.

In all the pain, Garuda does not see the fireball headed its way. Garuda's face is met with an incinerating sphere of flame, completely annihilating the Shadow. Garuda fades into nothing more than a cloud of ash and a terrified yelp.

[The icy](#) dome begins to melt, water dripping onto them. Well, it wasn't going to last very long under the desert sun anyway.

"We got the papyrus," Fundy says, hopping off Skeppy as if he isn't the reason Skeppy is sprawled out on ice right now. "We'd better take this back to Gina right away." He hands it to Dream, who tucks it into his coat.

"Are you alright?"

Dream glances over at Skeppy, still motionless with a silly smile on his face as Bad shakes his shoulder.

"What's up with him?" Eret asks.

"Tarukaja...uh...power boost," Navi says, following Dream's gaze. "I thought he needed a little boost to, y'know, make the ice dome."

"He looks like he's on drugs," Sapnap says.

"Maybe that's what a power boost in the Metaverse feels like," Dream says. Maybe Navi should lay off using that buff for a bit.

"I think it'll wear off soon..." Eret says. He blinks as a droplet of water lands on his mask. "Anyway, we should get out of here."

Bad and Sapnap haul Skeppy to the Fundybus. Eret steps on the accelerator, bringing the Fundybus to a monotonous trundle along the featureless sands of the desert.

*

[Is this](#) what you were looking for?" Dream asks, holding the papyrus out to Shadow Gina, who meets them once more in the main chamber, before the green door.

"Yes," Shadow Gina says. "Have you not read it?"

"Well, no. Because that's rude."

Shadow Gina giggles. "You're a funny one. That papyrus is meant for you and your friends. Please, do unroll it."

Dream furrows his brows. What is she playing at here? He does as he is told, however, the papyrus

crinkling worryingly under his fingers, as if it will just scatter into dust in the next moment.

When Dream finally unrolls it, he realizes that it contains a map of the area, though it looks nothing like the grand stairway that he came across just yesterday.

“Well then, good luck,” Shadow Gina says. She raises a hand and flicks her wrist.

[And](#) Dream’s stomach drops.

Literally.

The ground beneath the Thieves disappear like magic, leaving them standing on nothing but air. Dream screams at the top of his lungs because there’s a *reason* he hates – no, *loathes* – roller coasters. The way the cart coasts down the track, the screeching of the wheels, the creaking of the...

Dream lands harshly into a pit of sand. Not stationary sand. The sand *flows* like water in a river. If they flow *with* the sand and end up... Dream makes the mistake of glancing around, only to see a bottomless pit where the sand seems to be emptying into.

“Grab on!”

Necronomicon levitates above them, tentacles slithering over to the other Thieves and curling around their bodies, lifting them up above the rushing pit of sand. Dream’s feet touches solid ground and he has never felt more grateful to Navi than in that one moment.

[“Well,”](#) Eret says, brushing sand off his pants. “I certainly hadn’t expected that.”

“Yeah, what gives?” Skeppy sets a pane of ice over the pit of sand. “Dude. We almost died.”

“She’s really out to kill us,” Darryl says, glancing up. The hole they fell through has been covered up with sandstone. The chamber they stand in has dim lighting, pillars holding the ceiling up at every corner, each engraved with what appears to be hieroglyphics.

“We should focus on getting out of here,” Fundy says. “Dream, you have the map with you, right?”

A stab of panic shoots through Dream when he realizes that the map is missing! The papyrus must have been lost to the sand. He rummages through his pockets, finding nothing but Ender Pearls and Goho-Ms and lockpicks and-

“It’s fine,” Navi says, striding up to them. With a wave of his hand, he draws up a digitalized map of the area. “I had Necronomicon save the image.”

“Holy shit. That is *cool*!”

“No swearing,” Bad says, slapping Sapnap’s shoulder. He peers over Navi’s shoulder. “But he’s right. It *is* cool.”

“Yeah, better than some fox with a questionable sense of smell...” Skeppy mumbles.

“Hey! I heard that!”

Dream rests his arm on Navi’s shoulder. “So, where are we headed, dear Navi?”

Navi splutters. “I don’t think you were ever this confident in the real world.”

“Really now?”

“This cursor, right?” Eret cuts in, withdrawing his finger when it passes through the holographic image. He references a blinking triangle, surrounded by six smaller circles. “That’s where we are?”

“Yes,” Navi says. “So, our quickest route would be to go up this ladder to reach a higher floor...oh, and there are some stairs here that you can take that will lead you to the exit.”

“Is there anything else?”

Navi traces their route with his finger. “There’s a corridor leading to nowhere, but I’m sensing some strong signals coming from there. Maybe we can check it out once we’ve secured our escape route.”

“You can sense something so far away?” Eret looks impressed.

“It’s like...just a feeling. I can feel it,” Navi says. “There’s nothing concrete to show for it. I just...know.”

“You have to...you have to teach me one day,” Eret says, nodding. “My Persona’s somewhat of a scanning type too, but my powers aren’t very strong.”

“I’d be happy to.”

It seems Eret and Navi have really hit it off. Dream pouts childishly, keeping his arm on Navi’s shoulder.

“I’m sensing some Shadows prowling about as well,” Navi says. He taps the screen, adding flashing red dots on the map that seem to move in set patterns. “We’d best be on our guard.”

With Navi’s help, keeping them from getting lost, telling them when an enemy is near, is very helpful, allowing them to hide from strong foes and to conserve their strength. It always helps to know what to hit Shadows with and how they are going to act next in order to defend themselves against the threat.

“That’s the corridor that leads to nowhere,” Navi says, gesturing towards a long hallway with a giant coffin visible in the distance. The lighting is even dimmer there, and Dream isn’t sure he wants to enter.

“You wanna go check it out?” Dream asks.

“The exit’s right there,” Fundy says. “Maybe we can come back another time.”

“I have to agree with Fundy here.” Bad eyes the door with sunlight filtering through its cracks. “Honestly speaking, I’m a little tired from the whole bandit thing just now.”

“So, if we end the infiltration today...any objections?” Dream asks, turning to face the team.

No one does – have objections, that is. Eret breaks the stone door with one of Robin Hood’s arrow of light, smashing it to fine dust. Dream is greeted with a face full of bright rays. He throws up a hand to shield his eyes from the glare of the sun.

As it turns out, they are behind the pyramid. They round the edge, reaching the entrance rather quickly.

“We’ve still got to do something about that green door,” Dream says. “Maybe that corridor hides

some kind of mechanism. George, you said you sensed something in there, right?”

“Yeah,” Navi says. “I did.”

“Then, we’ll check that out the next time we come here,” Dream says. “I think we’ve done enough for today. Everyone should have a good rest tonight.”

Dream approaches the spot where they had entered the Metaverse from, back turned to the ominous pyramid.

“Returning to the real world. Thank you for your hard work.”

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Chapter End Notes

Magician arcana rank 3 -> 4 (george)

Let the Holidays Begin

Chapter Summary

limited s links during the hols haiz

Chapter Notes

dream smp spoilers:

when wilbur sang the l'manburg anthem no joke i started to tear up

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

7/23 – THURSDAY – EVENING

Clay sneezes. God, the wind is chilly tonight. The sun has finally set, bringing with it its curtain of warmth. Darkness blankets Fariold as the insects begin to sing their melodious song. He lets the lid fall back onto the dustbin and prepares to head back inside. Curl up on his bed with his hoodie and his laptop and browse the web...

A weak mewling catches Clay's attention. He glances behind him. The sound seems to be coming from the bushes.

Gingerly, Clay walks over, brushing away the shrubbery with his hand, careful not to prick himself on the thorns. He sees a tail. And a bleeding paw. A torn ear. Then, a pair of eyes staring straight at him.

The cat has a sort of beige coating, its nose wrinkled, whiskers twitching. Kind of reminds him of Floris. Except it's a cat. It mews feebly, shrinking back against the prickly leaves, peering up at Clay with bright eyes, pupils dilated.

In any case, Clay can't leave it out here like this.

"Come on," Clay coaxes. The cat stares at his hand, as if contemplating. "I'm not gonna hurt you."

The cat flinches when Clay lays his palm against its head. It mews when he begins to pet it. Well, he's had some experience with Floris, but a cat is a whole different animal.

The cat seems to trust him more now, even going so far as to allow Clay to pick it up. It is then that

Clay notices the collar around its neck, a tiny metal piece hung on it.

AntF.

“Ent-fe?” Clay tries to pronounce it. The cat glances up at him quizzically. Well then, time for Floris to meet his new feline friend. He flips the metal nametag around. No contact details, nothing. Only the cat’s name. “I think I’ll just call you Ant.”

The cat purrs.

Clay re-enters the house and carries the cat upstairs to the room, where Floris is watching Nick do homework with an extremely bored expression on his face. He looks up when Clay returns.

“What is that?” Floris narrows his eyes.

“Meet Ant,” Clay says. “Ant’s hungry and tired and sleepy and you’re not going to leave Ant out in the big, scary wilderness, are you?”

Floris says nothing.

“You brought a *cat* home?” Nick stares at it. “Dude, we don’t have cat food. Or a bed. Or anything.”

“We have some canned tuna and I can go buy some food tomorrow. We can take out the spare blanket as a makeshift bed first.”

“You’re so invested in this,” Nick says. “Are you replacing Floris?”

“What?” Floris cries. “No! No, no, no!” The look he shoots Clay is nothing short of betrayal. “Are you serious?”

“Of course not,” Clay says, placing Ant down on the bed. “I’m just taking care of Ant until it gets better. Oh, and until we find its owner.”

Clay prepares the tuna and a bowl of water. After Ant is done with its meal, it seems to smile up at Clay, eyes turning into slits, meowing gratefully.

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast acquired a new vow. It shall become the wings of rebellion that breaketh thy chains of captivity. With the birth of the Devil Persona, I have obtained the winds of blessing that shall lead to freedom and new power...

Clay makes a mental note to himself to procure some cat food tomorrow, as well as a tiny bed and a bowl.

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[7/24 – FRIDAY – DAYTIME](#)

“You look like shit.”

“Oh, really? Well, maybe because I didn’t expect to go on a date with you,” Zak says, scowling.

“Well, you *did* buy the tickets without asking,” Clay says. He turns to the cashier as soon as he reaches the front and buys a giant bowl of popcorn and a cup of Fanta.

“He’s got a point,” Floris says, peeking out through Clay’s bag. Zak places his order as well, then

turns to Floris with a pout.

“I wanted it to be a surprise!”

“Life is unfair, Zak. Life is unfair,” Clay says, sipping at his Fanta. Their movie is starting soon.
“So, what movie is this?”

“I told you before.”

“Well, I forgot. Or maybe I didn’t bother reading your message.”

“It’s The Bridge Curse.”

Clay stops in his tracks, entire body freezing.

“That sounds scary as fuck,” Floris says.

“Yeah, it is,” Zak says. A devilish grin spreads across his lips. “Look, the idea was that Darryl would get scared, then he’d cling on to me, and boom! I’d be a happy man!”

“Your idea of a romantic date was to get your date scared as hell.”

Zak purses his lips. “Can you not put it that way?”

“There’s always Halloween,” Clay says, shrugging. “Get him to go to a haunted house with you or something.”

“Halloween is the tenth month. We’re only at the seventh!”

“Almost eighth.”

Clay isn’t sure what he is expecting when the movie begins to play. Perhaps it is not scary by conventional standards, but God is Clay – not Dream – a coward. Jump-scaries, flickering lights, screaming...Nope, no way. Clay is *out* of here.

Surprisingly, he stays till the end, till the credits start rolling.

“That’s...that was wild,” Zak says with a nervous chuckle.

Clay isn’t getting any sleep tonight.

“It wasn’t even that scary,” Floris says, laughing. “I think the Shadows we fight are scarier.”

“Says you!” Clay and Zak yell in unison.

On the way home, Clay can’t help but glance over his shoulder every few seconds...

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7/24 – FRIDAY – EVENING

<Phoenix SC> Remember what I told u the last time?

<Phoenix SC> about how she thought I was gonna...do something to her?

<Phoenix SC> turns out her mother’s been telling her that

<Dream> but you aren't are you?

<Phoenix SC> at least you're not gullible, kid

<Phoenix SC> if she has even a shred of evidence

<Phoenix SC> I'd be arrested or she would have full custody of my daughter by now

Hmm...

<Dream> did you manage to talk to her

<Dream> your daughter

<Phoenix SC> I did, actually. caught her attention with football.

<Phoenix SC> although, im not sure what to talk about next. what do teenagers like?

That's a valid question.

<Dream> maybe something about school? maybe whether shes joined a club?

<Dream> seems like a safe choice

<Dream> maybe you can talk over a meal or something too

<Phoenix SC> hmm I think I'll try that

<Phoenix SC> thank you

<Phoenix SC> seriously. i'll let you know how it goes

<Dream> it's no problem. good luck!

"This wife of his..." Floris says, voice trailing off.

"Sounds like she's trying to get her daughter to distrust him," Clay says with a hum. At the rate this is going...

"We'll wait and see what happens," Floris says. "Maybe we can log on more often, now that it's the holidays and all."

Clay agrees. He logs off and places his laptop back on the shelf. Nick is already asleep, soft snores coming from the bottom bunk. Clay throws the thin blanket over himself and prepares to hit the sack as well.

*

7/25 – SATURDAY – DAYTIME

"We're heading in on Monday, right?" George asks, phone in hand. "To be honest, I'm a little worried about Gina..."

"We'll go in on Monday," Clay says. "No point rushing it and risk dying if we're tired."

George nods. "Fair enough. Where do you want to go today?"

Frankly, Clay hadn't thought about it when he invited George out. Perhaps they could just take a stroll down Valentine Hills...or something.

"Oh, I heard that there's a new fishing pond that just opened in Valleyberth," George says. "Want to go check it out?"

Clay didn't think that George would have been into fishing, but it sounds better than his original plan at least, or lack thereof. He lets George lead him there, taking a bus down to this new area at the edge of the city.

This place is rather different from Valentine Hills or Beatty in the sense that Clay isn't getting pushed around with people on all sides. Instead, it's a pleasant walk, a light summer breeze caressing their faces as they walk down the street headed for the fishing pond.

Said pond is as quiet as the street it sits upon, the slow trickle of the streams calming music to Clay's ears. They pay for their entrance fee and for the equipment. George finds them a spot away from a chattering group of elderly men.

Clay remembers fishing with his friends back in elementary school, running down to the riverside with their small nets to catch guppies and other freshwater species. Those days are long gone now, but the memories are still fond in his mind.

George casts his line into the water, the bobber breaking the surface. Clay has to admit that this is his first time fishing with a pole, so he discreetly follows George's lead.

"I never once thought I'd end up in the Phantom Thieves," George says. "Like, ever."

"Really?"

"Yeah," George says. "I mean, how would I have known that the leader of the Phantom Thieves sits in front of me in class every day?"

"That's true." Clay laughs.

George's line tugs and he reels it in, pulling up a small, grey fish, flopping with all its might. George carefully places it into the bucket of water beside them and casts his line into the water once more.

"George, about Gina...what exactly happened?" Clay asks. "Why does she...?"

The flowing river permeates the silence.

[George](#) lets out a suffering sigh. "You remember the rumours right? The ones about me?"

"Yeah."

"The burning house, my family dying...it's true. All of it," George says, staring at the water. "Except I didn't do it."

Clay can hardly imagine George as the kind of person who would commit such atrocities either.

"It was our mother," George says. "She...She went mad. Wanted to kill us all to exact her revenge against our father." He shakes his head, eyes glistening. "She set fire to the house in the dead of night. Since Gina and I slept in the same room, I managed to get the both of us out of there, but... Garrett died with our mother."

“Is Garrett your brother?”

“Yeah,” George says. “He was only a baby when it happened, and he and Gina were closer...” He swipes at his eyes, voice cracking. “Shit.”

Tentatively, Clay winds an arm around George’s shoulder. George’s jaw clenches, a hand over his eyes. Neither of them says anything for the longest time, listening only to the chirp of birds perched on the branches and the soothing running of the river.

“Sorry,” George says with a watery laugh. When he turns to Clay again, his eyes are rimmed red. “I got a bit carried away there.”

“Don’t be sorry. You’re allowed to feel sad about it,” Clay says firmly, placing both hands on George’s shoulder. “Look, George, if you ever need someone to listen to you, I’ll be here, okay?”

For a moment, George looks like a scared animal, taken completely by surprise. He glances away, swallowing visibly.

“I...Thanks,” George whispers. “Thanks, Clay.”

Clay smiles, chest feeling so warm and fuzzy inside. “It’s no problem.”

[George](#) gestures to his rod. Something appears to be tugging at the line. Clay pulls on it, only for the rod to bend. He attempts to reel it in even harder, only for the struggling fish to jerk at the line. Clay almost falls in, if not for George wrapping his arms around his waist and pulling him back.

“What the actual fuck!” George hisses. Clay grits his teeth. It may be nothing more than a fish, but Clay sure as hell won’t lose this war!

With one final yank, Clay and George topple backwards, something gigantic flying into the sky, sailing past their bodies and crashing onto the floorboards, jumping and twitching and looking awfully uncomfortable.

[“What](#) the-“ Clay scrambles, pushing himself up from the ground and staring at the fish. It flops almost lifelessly, glassy eyes staring up at the sun. Even the droning chatter of the elderly group has stopped. The fish is *huge*!

As it turns out, Clay happened to have caught the Guardian of the river, an elusive fish that very few people have ever seen, which the fishing pond prides themselves upon.

“Well then,” George says, eyeing the sheer number of tokens that Clay has gotten. “I think it’s time to head back.”

Clay has absolutely no idea what to do with his tokens. Maybe he’ll give them to Nick or something.

*

[7/25 – SATURDAY – EVENING](#)

“Let me just say this,” Clay says, holding up his hands. “I’ve never come here in my life.”

The twin wardens look up at him, blinking, then turn their attention back to the wide array of gym machines all lined up in the room smelling of musty sweat. Clay feels so out of place here, a lanky teenager who gets all his exercise fighting imaginary monsters in another realm standing in the

middle of a gym, surrounded by buff people working out those goddamn muscles.

“What’s this do?” Caroline walks over to a treadmill and climbs onto it, nearly dropping her baton.

“You run on it,” Clay says. Justine watches curiously from the side as Clay starts the treadmill up.

Caroline stifles a shriek as the belt begins to move. She would have tumbled off if not for Clay stopping it almost immediately.

“What was that, inmate?” Caroline stabs her baton in his direction.

“You run on it,” Clay says. “When that” – he points to the belt – “begins to move, you run so you don’t fall off.”

“Oh, so it’s something that you can use for your rehabilitation,” Caroline says. “Inmate, get on it immediately!”

Clay sighs, doing as he is told. He fiddles around with the buttons, till he gets to a speed that he is comfortable with.

“Would it not be more effective, if we were to place something dangerous at this end?” Justine ponders. “Caroline, lend me your baton for a while.”

“What! No!” Clay cries. Caroline jabs at the buttons that she can reach, and Clay is suddenly running at impossibly fast speeds. Without the power of the Metaverse and with a simple slip of the foot, Clay’s feet goes out from under him and he’s thrown off the treadmill in an unceremonious fashion, Caroline’s baton jabbing at his spine, sending pain lancing up his back.

Clay is reluctant to get off the floor, face burning with mortification. He wants the ground to just swallow him up right there, right then. That’s it. He’s never coming back again. Not even if anyone begs him to.

With a kick to the butt, however, Clay does peel himself off the ground, but there is no helping the heat in his cheeks as Caroline pulls him over to another training machine, the bench press.

Okay. The Metaverse better have trained his muscles up a little, what with all that hacking and slashing. He’s got this. He’s not going to embarrass himself in front of all these gym-goers any more than he already has.

“What do you do here?” Justine asks.

“Lift weights,” Clay says. “You lie down there and you basically...”

“Show us, inmate,” Caroline says, kicking Clay in the shin. Good Lord, Igor needs to teach these kids some manners.

Clay lays down on the bench, hands grasping the metal bar. He probably shouldn’t be doing this without a spotter...a bad feeling rings alarm bells in his head the moment he lifts the bar off the rack.

The weights aren’t too heavy, though Clay’s biceps are already screaming after a couple more lifts...wait a minute. Did the weights just get heavier?

“This speed is unacceptable.” Justine says from above him.

“Faster, inmate!”

Are the twins...sitting on the weights?

By the time Clay places the bar safely back on the rack, his arms are dying, begging for relief, only to sink further into despair as Caroline and Justine find some new toy to play with.

Clay isn't sure the twins have noticed it, but they are garnering dirty stares when they leave the gym.

"So, that is where other humans go to when they undergo rehabilitation," Justine says as a matter-of-factly. "How interesting."

"Yeah, but I don't think any of them can take down Shadows," Caroline scoffs. "We're stronger than all of them combined!"

Yeah. Fat chance. Looking at their scrawny, tiny bodies and total lack of muscle...

"And that includes you, inmate," Caroline says, brandishing her baton at Clay.

Clay shrugs. Best not to ruin a child's dreams. He escorts Justine and Caroline back to the Velvet Room, then decides to head straight home.

*

Chapter End Notes

If anyone's interested i was listening to gothic ed 2: unity when writing the george s link

Devil arcana rank 0 -> 1 (AntFrost)

Kindness +3 (taking care of A.F.)

Guts +5 (scared as shit because of that movie)

Hermit arcana rank 4 -> 5 (PhoenixSC)

Proficiency + 3 (crafting online)

Magician arcana rank 4 -> 5 (george)

Proficiency +3 (fishing)

Aeon arcana rank 2 -> 3 (justine and caroline)

Deadline: Tomorrow

Chapter Summary

2 sleepybois s links

Chapter Notes

DISCLAIMER: I do NOT know Ponk's actual name. I used a placeholder name that literally means "John Doe"

Also, I have absolutely NO IDEA what someone is like when they're drunk I've only ever seen it described in books/movies, etc. I've never drunk alcohol of any kind and I've never been around drunk friends

Tbh i dont like how this chapter turned out.....

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

7/26 – SUNDAY – DAYTIME

“...or that kid. That boy is going to die.”

The bell jingles. Clay freezes on the spot, seeing Phil standing with the most furious expression on his face. He stares down an officer dressed in a dark grey peacoat and a crimson tie, badges pinned on the breast of his coat. He is accompanied by several other officers, all of them standing at attention.

“You won’t do that,” Phil snarls. “You’re an enforcer of the law!”

“I’m the Chief of Police! I *decide* the law!” the man roars. “I’m telling you for the last time, Phil. Drop the case, and I won’t touch the boy.”

“Tommy did nothing.”

“He was in the wrong place at the wrong time. He was borne to the wrong set of parents,” the man, the Chief of Police says. “Now, if you’d excuse me.”

The man ignores Clay completely as he strides out of there, surrounded by his henchmen. Clay glances worriedly from the retreating backs of the men and to Phil, who slumps back into his chair, burying his face in his hands.

“Phil, are you alright?”

Phil looks up, his face the picture of a defeated man.

“Clay.” He sighs, staring listlessly at the display panel. “I think...I think I will have to drop the case.”

“Drop the case? But-“

“You heard them,” Phil says, something dangerous flashing in his eyes. “They’re going to erase Tommy if I continue. I’d rather give up the case than give up Tommy’s life.”

“What about your justice?” Clay presses. “What about revealing the truth behind Tommy’s parents’ murder?”

“But what can I do if Tommy’s life is at stake?” Phil stands, suddenly looking very tall and looming. “Tell me what I should do, Clay, without endangering Tommy.”

Clay presses his lips together, then finally speaks. “What’s the full name of that guy? The Chief of Police?”

“Ivan Tabbs,” Phil sighs, then in a moment of realization, glances back at Clay. “What did you need that information for?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Clay says, shrugging. He heads on over to the break room to put down his things, acutely aware of Phil’s watchful eye.

Clay’s got to do something about that man, for both Phil and Tommy’s sakes.

*

7/26 – SUNDAY – EVENING

Wilbur didn’t show up today. Not even after repeated messages, repeated calls. Thank goodness Mrs Armstrong has a business meeting tonight. Clay isn’t sure how to explain his absence away.

Ant rubs at his leg and Clay reaches down to pick him up, running his hand through Ant’s soft fur.

He tries Wilbur’s cell again, and finally, on the third ring, he picks up.

“Hello?”

Well, it’s hard not to notice the obvious slur in his voice.

“Who’s...this?”

Clay can almost smell the alcohol through the phone. “Wilbur?”

There is a scuffle on the other end, and Clay is greeted by a new, shriller voice. “Uh, hello? Are you Wilbur’s girlfriend or something?”

Clay pauses. “I’m his student.”

“Oh, uh, boyfriend, then. Look, I’m not judging,” the new voice says. “I’m his friend, Alex. Can you, maybe, like, give me an address or something? Wilbur’s not looking too good right now.”

“Okay, first off, I’m not his boyfriend.” The thought just sounds wrong. “And secondly, where are you?”

“You’re not a minor, are you?” Alex asks. “I’m at Newcomer, at Bowarrow.”

Clay vaguely remembers Bowarrow Street. And Newcomer? What kind of place is that?

"I'm on my way." Clay lets Ant back down on the floor. Ant scurries up the stairs, passing Floris by.

"Where are you going?"

"Bowarrow Street," Clay says. "Wilbur's wasted."

"Wasted?"

"Yeah," Clay says. "Wanna come?"

*

[As it turns](#) out, Newcomer is a bar. Quite noisy, and it doesn't seem like they discourage minors. There aren't even any bouncers. Clay slips in, hood pulled up over his head.

It doesn't take long to spot Wilbur and his friend Alex by the counter, the former embarrassingly drunk and slamming his fist on the table, a bottle of beer in the other hand. Alex appears exasperated, expression morphing into one of pure relief when he spots Clay making his way over.

"You're just a *kid*!"

"Yes, I *am* a minor," Clay says. "And no, I don't know where Wilbur lives. I only came 'cause I'm worried."

"You said my name?" Wilbur sports a goofy smile. "That's my name. Wilbur. Wilbur Soot."

"He's gone mad," Alex says.

"For L'manburg!" Wilbur pumps a fist in the air, giggling to himself and slumping on the counter. Clay catches the bottle just before it slides from between his fingers.

"Insane," Alex says, nodding. "He's never gotten this drunk before. It's all 'cause of his fucking deadline and shit and, uh..."

"I'll...uh...I know who to call," Clay says. He digs his phone out and dials Phil's number.

"Hello? Clay? Is there something you need?"

"Well, yes. Wilbur's gotten himself super drunk."

"Where?"

"Bar Newcomer. Bowarrow Street--"

"Oh, I know where that is," Phil says. He sighs deeply. Clay can almost imagine Phil dragging his hand down his face. "God, okay. I'm on my way."

"Thanks, Phil." Clay hangs up.

"You're a real lifesaver, man," Alex says, adjusting his beanie.. "I mean, I'm just a friend from work, so uh...Sorry for calling you all the way down. It's probably way past your bedtime."

"I'm seventeen," Clay says. "I sleep at, like, midnight."

"He sleeps at midnight!" Wilbur stabs a finger at Clay. "The child sleeps at midnight, everyone!"

Clay doesn't like the attention they're drawing. Many people from the nearby tables have turned their heads to watch the drama. Please, Phil, please hurry...

"So, you're Wilbur's student?" Alex says. "The guy's been pretty stressed lately, huh?"

"Yeah, he is."

["The deadline"](#)'s tomorrow." Alex wrings his hands. "And, uh, Wilbur's still got a bit left to go, but Ponk's, well..."

"What's his full name?" Clay asks.

"Uh...it's Piet Pompies," Alex says. "But...what are you gonna do with it?"

Clay is saved from answering that when the door swings open and Phil walks in, trench coat thrown over his shoulder, glancing around. He finds them easily and crosses the room in a few quick steps.

"Get up, Wil," Phil says.

"Oh, if it isn't Phil," Wilbur sounds tired. "Come. Sit and have a drink."

"Wil, I said, get up."

It takes a lot of effort and strength for the three of them to get Wilbur off the chair (Alex paid for the drinks) and out of the bar. Wilbur empties his guts out in a drain just outside, coughing and hacking.

"Dude, you gotta watch your health," Alex says. "It's not worth destroying yourself over this, man."

Clay has to agree. Something has to be done. Before tomorrow.

This calls for some Phantom Thieves' time.

*

[7/26 – SUNDAY – EVENING](#)

"I...It's a bit worrying how on board all of you are with this," Dream says. "I was expecting to go in alone or with Sapnap and Fundy or something." He hisses when he hits his head on the ceiling of the Fundybus as they run over another weaker Shadow.

"I was bored," Skeppy says, feet kicked up on Dream's seat. "And Bad was just giving Rat all his attention."

"Rat? You keep a pet mouse?" Navi asks.

"Rat's my dog," Bad says, clearing his throat. "I just call her Rat."

Eret makes another sharp turn – Dream wishes he can just stop doing that – sending all of them hurtling to the right. The back of Dream's head slams against the window.

"Dude," Sapnap rubs at his forehead. "Have you heard of the term 'safe driving' before?"

"Of course," Eret says. "We have never crashed, haven't we?"

“I mean, no, but-argh!”

“We’re pretty far down,” Navi says, righting himself. He draws up his holographic map. “If I were to pinpoint our location, we’re probably around...twenty floors down.”

“Twenty floors? Just how far does this place go?” Eret asks.

“I’d say you’re like a quarter?” Navi says. He taps his chin. “Just over a quarter.” With another wave of his hand, the map disappears. “The platform’s just up ahead, by the way. We’ve spent a total of ten minutes here, so we’d better hurry.”

Two floors down, Navi claims that he senses a stronger power. Is that Ponk’s Shadow?

Dream finds the familiar void up ahead, swirling in all its dark glory, bits of red and black floating around it, as if taunting them. The Fundybus sails through the void. Dream beats back that familiar feeling of vertigo and the Fundybus touches solid ground once more.

There is a Shadow standing there, but Dream squints, and is quite certain that it’s the Shadow of that man who had threatened Phil with the extinguishing of Tommy’s life. The Chief of Police guy.

“Ooh, he looks evil,” Fundy says.

He *does* look evil. For a man who threatened an innocent boy’s *life* just to cover up his crimes... Oh, Dream can’t wait to get his hands around his neck...

[“Who’re you?”](#) Are you the Phantom Thieves?” Shadow Tabbs asks haughtily, arms folded, shoulders straightened, seeming taller than he actually is. The black flames around him grow more aggressive, on its way to licking the ceiling.

“That’s right,” Dream says. “And we’re here to change your heart.”

“Hah!” Shadow Tabbs cackles. “Change my heart? You’re joking. You’re nothing but petty criminals who’ve just *happened* to make it big!” He claps his hands. “I commend you, Thieves.”

“That’s it,” Sappnap says, readying his cudgel. “This ends here, old man!”

“With age comes wisdom.” Shadow Tabbs says. His form begins to change. “You brats will never be able to defeat me!”

[Shadow](#) Tabbs rises up to his true form. Sappnap groans.

“This toilet bowl shit again?”

“Language!” Bad whines. He summons Carmen, sending a barrage of fireballs at Shadow Tabbs, who brave the flames and counters with an onslaught of icicle spears.

“What the muf-“ An icicle spear stabs Bad in the leg, the only one that slipped through the forcefield that Eret just threw up. It pins him to the ground, blood oozing from the wound, staining his robes and dripping to the ground.

“Bad!” Skeppy runs forward, katana in hand. Fundy accompanies him, Diarama at the ready.

Eret slams a few bullets into Shadow Tabbs, forcing him back. Shadow Tabbs draws up a curtain of darkness, blocking all attacks aimed at him. Dream summons Ara Mitama, hurling spheres of cyan at Shadow Tabbs, disappearing once they hit his shield.

“Ah shit,” Dream mumbles. The darkness unveils briefly, revealing Shadow Tabbs glowing a dark red.

“He’s charging up! Everyone defend yourselves!” Navi shouts.

Dream wastes no time in summoning Neko Shogun, conferring additional defence onto himself. Navi bathes them all in a violet light just as Shadow Tabbs unleashes a wave of pulsing darkness, empty and void-like.

“Navi, have you figured out its weakness?” Fundy asks. Shadow Tabbs laughs in the face of Sappnap’s mighty strike to the chest.

“No weaknesses,” Navi says. “Don’t use Bufu attacks or Eiga attacks. Weaker Shadows are starting to gather.”

“Skeppy, you and Bad take them out,” Dream shouts. “The rest of us focus on Tabbs!”

Skeppy and Bad hop out of the frontlines. Dream turns his head at the shout of his name, only to see a spear of ice headed his way. Crap, he has no time to summon a-

It slams into his chest, razor tip piercing straight through his lung. Pain threatens to split him in half. He attempts to yell, shriek, anything! However, the only sound that comes out of his mouth is nothing more than a weak gurgle.

Someone crouches by his side, screaming something into his ear. A furry tail by his hand. Can’t... breathe... Dream coughs, body convulsing, spraying more blood over his cheek.

“...am! Dream!”

His sight begin to clear, hearing no longer clouded. Bent over him is Sappnap and Fundy who presses his paw to Dream’s chest, forcing the blood back in, the skin to heal.

“Ah, these fucking pieces of shit,” Sappnap fires an electric bolt at a nearby Shadow, obliterating it.

“Dream! Are you alright?” Navi asks. Necronomicon hovers over them. It stabs its tendrils into the ground, and the ground glows a light shamrock green. Exhaustion melts away from Dream’s form, and he leaps to his feet and pushes Fundy away, the both of them narrowly avoiding a spear of darkness.

Shadow Tabbs must be running out of energy, or he must be getting desperate, what with his relentless spam of spells. They are more reckless yet more unpredictable. A shot of ice misses Dream, slicing his sleeve and stabbing into the ground behind him.

A lone bullet slams into Shadow Tabbs’ horn, smashing it clean off. The severed horn falls to the ground and black blood spurts from the wound. Shadow Tabbs roars in pain, both hands coming up to clutch at his head.

“Fundy! Let’s go!” Sappnap leaps into the air and Fundy conjures a whirlwind that lifts Sappnap even higher, till his hair brushes the ceiling.

“Take this, motherfucker!” Sappnap raises his cudgel high over his head, bringing it down on Shadow Tabbs’ head with a loud crack. Shadow Tabbs howls in pain, dropping to the ground, toilet bowl abandoned.

[His monstrous](#) form fades, leaving nothing but a groaning, pathetic Chief of Police on his knees,

hardly looking like a figure of authority.

“What the hell’s wrong with you lot?” Tabbs cries. “I was doing what I had to survive!”

“Doing what, huh?” Dream says. He cocks his pistol and presses the cold barrel against Shadow Tabbs’ temple.

“They were getting in the way!” Shadow Tabbs exclaims. “I had to...they were...I should never have left that boy alive!”

“Shut up!” Dream hisses. “Tommy and Phil went through *shit* because of you!” His fingers close around the trigger. Shadow Tabbs whimpers.

“Dream, stop it,” Sapnap says, stepping forward and grasping Dream’s wrist. “We’re not here to kill him.”

“But he-“

“Dream, I’m gonna have to ask you to step away,” Eret says, walking forward. “Killing his Shadow is going to do nothing.”

Dream grinds his teeth, then moves back.

“So, Tabbs,” Eret says. “We’d like you to go back to your real body and atone for what you did. The harm you caused Tommy and Phil.”

Shadow Tabbs harrumphs, the frown still present on his face. His Shadow form disappears into a spiral of butterflies that fade away as soon as they touch the ceiling.

[“That’s](#) one target down,” Bad says. “Dream, you okay?”

“I’m...” Dream nods. “I’m fine.” He glances back at the rest of the team. All pairs of eyes are on him, appraising him. He’s fine. He has to be for the sake of the Phantom Thieves.

They pile back into the Fundybus and Eret takes the wheel once more. Next up, Ponk’s Shadow.

*

[“That’s](#) Ponk’s Shadow,” Fundy says. “He’s the one who’s been pushing the deadline forward, right? And basically threatening Wilbur.”

“Yeah,” Dream says. He approaches Shadow Ponk, the man surrounded by the usual dancing black flames.

“What are the Phantom Thieves doing here?” Shadow Ponk appears intrigued, but those golden eyes only depict arrogance. “Are you here to...perhaps...steal my heart?”

“Yeah, well, that’s what we do,” Skeppy says, stepping forward.

“Is there any way we can convince you to go back to your real person and-“ Eret starts, but stops when the fires around Shadow Ponk grows larger and larger. Negotiations broke down quick.

“I know Soot can do it,” Shadow Ponk says. “I know Wilbur Soot can net us the money. He’s the only one who can rise up again and rake in the cash!”

“Oh, now that’s just...you’re a real bastard,” Sapnap readies his weapon.

“I need the money!” Shadow Ponk shouts. Dream covers his mouth with an arm as the flames begin to rage around him, leaving scorch marks on the ground. “I need the money or the company’s going to die!”

[Shadow](#) Ponk transforms into a small, floating goat-like spirit sitting cross-legged, wings immobile, a fiery horn atop his head. A loincloth studded with gems falls over his waist.

Shadow Ponk strikes without warning, raising a pillar of fire in Skeppy’s direction. Skeppy barely dodges it, hair singed. Necronomicon fires a scanning beam at Shadow Ponk, whirring sounds resonating from within like an actual CPU.

“Strong against Agi and Eiga skills. It’s weak against Bufu and Kou attacks!” Navi shouts.

“Gotcha!” Dream can already sense the weaker Shadows gathering, attracted by Shadow Ponk’s powerful aura. “Bad and Sapnap, take care of the Shadows. Eret, Skeppy, be careful! Fundy, healing duty!”

Shadow Ponk laughs a desperate sort of laugh, the flame on its horn flickering in the draft of battle. He casts upon them a blanket of hollow darkness, an inescapable shroud of dread that beckons them to its core.

“Shit!” The darkness is sticky, gooey hands clawing at their feet and legs, pulling them into the abyss...

Fear overrides all of Dream’s senses. He has to get out. He has to get out now! Now! Get out! Get out get out getoutoutOUTOUTOUT

Warm fingers close around his wrist, pulling at him, and Dream struggles against the person’s grasp. What are they doing? Who is that? Who is-! Dream emerges from the void of swirling blackness by yet another insistent yank. His feet find purchase on the ground, but he’s surrounded by monsters. Monsters blinking with yellow eyes and formless bodies and...

“Get me out of here! Stop! Don’t-!” Dream has to run. Can’t let those monsters get him, can’t- Dream’s heart races, his limbs trembling, as he flails wildly at the yellow-eyed monster who had, apparently, just halted his descent into that sea of insanity and-

“Snap out of it!” A harsh slap across his cheek breaks the spell on him. Two hands on his shoulder. Vision clearing. No longer surrounded by monsters but by familiar faces.

What the fuck was that? The one grabbing his shoulders is Eret, Robin Hood having manifested shield around them which has begun to crack under the pressure of Shadow Ponk’s attacks.

“Dream, back to reality,” Eret says, waving a hand in front of his face. “Back to reality.”

“Dream!” Necronomicon hovers above them. “Are you okay?”

Crap. That must have been some kind of ailment. Navi heals them up and returns some of their energy to them.

Okay, now Dream’s mad and ready to kick some ass. In a swift move, he summons Anzu, wings batting and sending a wave of wind at Shadow Ponk. Shadow Ponk braves the wind, drawing up a pillar of flames, protecting itself from the attack. Fundy leaps onto Dream’s shoulder, Zorro summoned and strengthening Dream’s already-blustering cyclone.

Shadow Ponk smashes into the wall, spraying dust and dirt everywhere. Four ice spears stab the

wall beside him, missing his head and limbs by mere centimetres. Shadow Ponk's demonic form evaporates, revealing his human form slumped against the wall.

"So," Dream says. Shadow Ponk shivers visibly. "Anything to say for yourself?"

"Wait, don't shoot!" Shadow Ponk cries. "You don't understand! I need that money, and if Soot wasn't going to our entire firm's going to go bankrupt!"

"And whose fault is that?"

"Our..." Shadow Ponk goes red in the face. "You don't know the criticism and hate we received from that whole plagiarism affair!"

"Might I remind you that *someone* deliberately pushed the deadline again and again, putting Wilbur in the same position as he is in now?" Dream says. "That someone who is sitting here in front of us right now."

"I..." Shadow Ponk looks apprehensive.

"Just give Wilbur some time," Dream says. "Extend the deadline by a couple of weeks, at least."

Shadow Ponk laughs. Already, his feet are beginning to dissolve into those glowing blue butterflies. "You know, I never intended to bring up that plagiarism thing. It doesn't make sense to destroy both his and our reputations. I just needed to put a little pressure on him. That's all."

Dream watches as Shadow Ponk fades away, dissolving into nothingness. He truly hopes the man changed for the better.

Skeppy watches as the icicles melt, water pooling onto the ground. "Are we done here?"

"Pretty much," Dream says. "Is there anything else you want to do?"

"I'm gonna be honest here and I'm tired as heck," Sapnap says, suppressing a yawn. "Can we go now?"

"I'm with Sapnap on this," Bad says. "We're going into the Palace tomorrow, too."

"Right then," Dream says. He closes his fingers around a Goho-M and drops it to the ground. The white smoke envelopes them and as soon as it clears, the group find themselves standing at the very entrance to Mementos.

"Returning to the real world. Thank you for your hard work."

Chapter End Notes

Proficiency +3 (working at the gun shop)

Pyramid of Wrath: Infiltration Middle

Chapter Summary

in the midst of infiltrating gina's palace

Chapter Notes

just a refresher for anyone who doesn't know/not familiar with smt/persona's way of naming their elemental skills since George is gonna be using it A LOT as the navi

Agi/Agilao/Agidyne (Fire)

Bufu/Bufula/Bufudyne (Ice)

Zio/Zionga/Ziodyne (Electric)

Garu/Garula/Garudyne (Wind)

Frei/Freila/Freidyne (Nuclear)

Psi/Psio/Psiodyne (Psychic)

Kouha/Kouga/Kougaon (Bless/Light -> damage-dealing)

Eiha/Eiga/Eigaon (Curse/Dark -> damage-dealing)

Hama/Hamaon (Bless/Light -> insta-kill)

Mudo/Mudoon (Curse/Dark -> insta-kill)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

7/27 – MONDAY – EARLY MORNING

Clay, I have to apologize for yesterday's incident. I have had no inhibition when it came to alcohol last night, it seemed. There is no excuse for what I have done, but I hope that you can accept my sincerest apologies and thanks.

Also, I have good news to share with you. The morning, I received a notice from my boss that my deadline is to be extended. It was strange, the suddenness of it, but I am grateful.

I will see you this coming Sunday. For now, I will have to return to my writing and not mess up this second chance that I was granted.

P.S. I apologize that you had to meet Alex

Wilbur Soot

“Seems that everything’s going well,” Floris says, reading over Clay’s shoulder. Clay places his phone on the table and takes another chunk out of his chocolate granola bar.

“Yeah,” Clay says, lifting his head and seeing Darryl and Zak approaching from the platform.

*

7/27 – MONDAY – DAYTIME

Dream reaches up and wipes a sheen of sweat off his forehead, hair matting together. God, why must his coat be so thick?

“That’s a coffin,” Bad says.

The Thieves approach the chamber that they had bypassed last time, the chamber that is likely to hold clues as to how to rid themselves of the green door blocking their way. In addition to the coffin giving off an ominous vibe, the room is only lit with flickering torches on the wall, painting the room with an eerie glow.

“And a doorway,” Navi says, gesturing to a corridor on a ledge just above the coffin.

“Nothing’s going to jump out at us, right?” Skeppy eyes the coffin.

“Please,” Bad mumbles. “*Please* don’t say that.”

Dream takes one step towards the coffin, before Navi grabs his shoulder. “Wait. I’m sensing enemy readings. From the coffin.”

“Okay. I say we burn it,” Sapnap says, already summoning Seiten Taisei. Bad summons Carmen.

“That’s a really good idea, Sapn-“

Bad’s sentence cuts off midway, replaced by a shocked squeak. Dream glances around, only to find Bad missing. No trace of him anywhere...

“Ow!” Skeppy yelps, jumping five feet into the air. He glares down at his feet, feet poised to kick, only to see a mouse clawing at his legs, peering up at him. Wait a minute, that mask looks familiar...

“Bad?” Skeppy squats down and scoops the shivering mouse up into his hands. The rest of the Thieves are gathered around him. Bad looks infuriated, pawing at Skeppy’s palm and pointing at the coffin.

All of Dream’s hairs stand on end when he is *certain* he sees two unblinking eyes from within the coffin.

“What the fuck was that?” Dream’s hand flies to his pistol.

[A gust](#) of wind picks up. Dream’s hair flutters against his mask as he steadily approaches the coffin.

“Get down!”

At Navi’s call, Dream wastes no time in dropping to the floor, barely avoiding a claw shooting out past the coffin, spindly fingers stabbing the air. God, he would have been dead meat if not for Navi’s warning. Navi has already retreated into Necronomicon as the coffin wobbles, picking itself up as if it has just woken from a long nap.

The Thieves arm themselves as the coffin stands, the unknown creature within peeking out with shifty golden eyes, scrutinizing them. At its command, a simple “come hither” motion, several Lamia worm up from the ground, sending sand flying into the air, mixing with the storm that the coffin monster has drafted up.

“Don’t use Ei or Kou skills,” Navi says. “Hit it with Garu!”

“Alright, Fundy, you’re up!” Dream shouts.

“On it!” Fundy summons Zorro, whipping up a whirlwind, spinning blades slicing the coffin, chipping at its body, knocking the coffin to the ground. The monster growls, a low deep sound muffled by its fall onto the sandstone. Skeppy finishes up the rest of the Lamia with a slash of his icy katana.

The team whips out their guns, barrels aimed at the Shadow.

“Hold up!” the Shadow cries. “What is this tyranny? You waltz into my home and expect to just walk all over me-“

“Oh, uh. This isn’t personal,” Dream says.

“Well fuck you too!”

Bad chitters angrily on Skeppy’s hand, tail whipping about.

Dream tilts his head. “No hard feelings.”

The Shadow doesn’t even have time to scream before he’s blasted into oblivion, bullets drilling holes into its hardened stone case. It bursts into dust, a cloud of ash billowing around them. Dream pinches a strip of ash off his cheek.

Immediately, Bad transforms back into his human form, complete with his robes and weapons.

“That was...” Bad wraps his arms around himself. “I never want to be a mouse ever again.”

“You lost the tail,” Skeppy says with a pout. “It was cute.”

“S-Shut up!”

Dream ignores their bickering, already heading up the stairs by the side of the room and peering through the doorway. The corridor is devoid of Shadows, which is a good thing. It leads to a larger chamber, and in the middle of it all stands a ballista.

“What’s that?” Nick squints at the contraption.

The ballista is way taller than Dream, almost reaching the ceiling. A giant bolt is slotted into the ballista. Following the aim of the bolt, Dream notices a giant beam of light casting a pool of green on the wall.

“What if we fire that?” Navi asks. “The ballista?”

“It’s huge, though,” Eret says. “How are we going to fire it?”

“Can we use our Personas or something?” Sapnap asks.

“I don’t want to damage the ballista,” Navi says. “It’s a little roughed up. If we make a wrong move...” He trails off. “Oh, wait. I’m sensing something. Over there.” Navi gestures towards a small wooden platform a ways from the ballista, accessible by a sandstone walkway just above the rapid flowing sand.

“What’s this?”

Set upon a pedestal is what appears to be a large orange button.

“Maybe it activates something,” Skeppy says. “Go on, push it.”

“What if it triggers an alarm?” Fundy asks, ears perked up.

“The last time that happened, we managed to get away,” Dream says, shrugging. What can possibly happen? He gives the button a good push and it sinks into the stone slab. A deafening crash resounds behind them. Dream flinches.

“Hey, the light!”

Dream turns to find the splintered bolt amongst the mountain of rubble beneath a giant hole, surrounded by a cloud of dust and sand. The hole is more than big enough for the slim beam of light to hit the green door. The door glows and rumbles, then it sinks beneath the ground.

“That was the entrance hall, right?” Sapnap asks.

“Yeah.” Navi has pulled up the map of the Palace in front of him. “We’re right by it. The door should have opened up.”

“Great,” Dream says. “Let’s go check it out.”

*

Just as Navi has said, the door has now indeed sunk beneath the ground, allowing them access to the next portion of the grand staircase. To Dream’s dismay, however, their advance is impeded by yet another green door, an exact duplicate of the one they had just passed.

“Maybe there’s a similar mechanism,” Eret says.

“Bet there’s another ballista too,” Sapnap says, sounding oddly excited about it.

“Corridor, to your left,” Navi says, pointing to a door covered in hieroglyphics. A sign affixed above it reads: *Chamber of Sarcophagi*. With the press of Dream’s hand on the door, the hieroglyphs blink green and the door opens with a groan.

The Chamber of Sarcophagi greets them with a crumbly sandstone floor that leads to a spiralling sandstone staircase that carries them over a treacherous pit of flowing sand. At the top of stairway, the Thieves come across a statue of an Egyptian god with the head of a dog, holding up a sparkling sphere. A statue of Anubis.

“Can we take this?” Fundy peers at the sphere, paws on his hips.

“Wait.” Eret is bent over, reading what appears to be instructions carved in stone. “It says a curse will befall us if we take it.”

“What is *that* supposed to mean?” Bad asks.

Dream eyes the flowing pit of sand. He can somewhat imagine...

“Let’s just take it,” Skeppy says, reaching out and grabbing it. “We might need it later.”

The ground begins to rumble, the tiles begin to shift and crumble. Just as Dream suspected, the floor is falling beneath their feet, one tile at a time, from the stairway they climbed, threatening to drop them to their inevitable doom. It’s only a matter of time...

“There!” Navi shouts, gesturing to a ledge above their heads. “We can escape from there!”

“Pearls out!” Dream hurls his, the black orb soaring through the air in a perfect arc at the ledge. The next second, Dream teleports to the platform. He rolls aside to make way for Sapnap, Bad, Skeppy and Eret who show up right after. Fundy and Navi show up in Necronomicon.

[“Man,](#) I wish I had a flying Persona.” Skeppy pouts. Dream watches as the stairway collapses into the flowing sand, sinking into its middle and disappearing from sight.

“So that was the curse?” Bad asks.

“Seems that way,” Fundy says. “I think we’ve got to be a bit more careful from now on.”

This new platform they’re on happens to link up to another large chamber via a long corridor lit with torches, this time flanked with sarcophagi. True to its name. At the far end of the chamber, past the sarcophagi, is another pedestal with an indent.

“You think this goes here?” Skeppy fits the sphere snugly into the indent and the pedestal vanishes. The wall behind it quivers and fades away, as if it had never been there in the first place, revealing a room behind it, housing a familiar piece of glass that they had seen before. Except that this time, there is a startling lack of light.

“Hey, here’s another one!” Fundy walks up to a ballista, hidden beneath an electronic screen spanning the length of the room. The ballista is aimed at an angle, an angle that would send the bolt smashing into the wall behind them.

Dream glances around. The only way out is through the chamber that they just came through, and beyond that is a sinking pile of sand. What are they supposed to do here? He walks over to Eret, who appears to be reading another stone slab engraved with peculiar characters.

Or not. It’s just terrible handwriting.

“Lay your hand upon my face and solve the puzzle to proceed,” Eret reads.

“Its face?” Sapnap asks.

“The slab, probably,” Eret says, flattening his palm against the carvings. The stone slab glows a bright neon green. Holographic numbers jump out at them, namely ones and zeroes, before the screen on the wall flickers to life. Unfortunately, all that he sees is a mashup of random colours and shapes,

“What *is* this?” Skeppy inspects the screen. “I don’t get it.”

“There’s another part to those instructions,” Navi points out. “We’re supposed to ‘solve the puzzle’.”

Dream stares at the screen, head cocked. Perhaps the ‘puzzle’ mentioned is hidden in this weird picture... Dream taps on the screen. A square of the screen leaps out at him. Dream swipes the square to the left, and the piece follows his movements, pushing all the other squares in a clockwise manner.

“So it’s a sliding block puzzle?” Sapnap groans.

“Seems that way,” Fundy says. “Come on, let’s work it out.”

It takes them close to ten minutes, but eventually, the blocks slide into their correct places, depicting a complete picture. A young girl with two boys, one older, one younger, crouching in one

corner, watching a woman on her knees, mourning at the moon, tears rolling down her cheeks.

“Is that...Gina?” Dream asks.

Navi remains silent.

“And that’s your mother?”

“Yes,” Navi bites out.

“Why must you leave?”

Dream whips his head around. Who was that? It’s a woman’s voice, but it’s not Gina’s.

“Did you just use me? Didn’t you love me? Why?”

The last word booms throughout the chamber, and the image disappears. The ballista fires its shot and a beam of light shines from the mirror. It shoots past the hole in the wall, lining up with the green door from the grand staircase. The door rumbles and slides open, just like the one before.

Dream glances over at Navi, who’s staring at the blank screen, a frown on his face.

“Are you okay?” Dream asks.

“Huh?” Navi jerks from a trancelike state. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

The rest of the Thieves have leapt down from the hole to the grand staircase, waiting for the two of them where the door is now gone. Ahead though, is yet another green door, and another hallway to their left.

“Guys,” Sappnap says, glancing at his phone. “I hate to break it to you, but it’s almost curfew. Mom’s home tonight.”

“In that case, we’ll continue it another day,” Dream says. “How about Thursday?”

“Sounds good,” Bad says, nodding. “We’re going to need time to rest, after all.”

“Right then,” Fundy says, clapping his paws. “Good job, everyone. We should all rest up after today.”

With that, the Thieves head down the staircase, back to the entrance of the pyramid.

*

[7/27 – MONDAY – EVENING](#)

Clay places a steaming cup of tea on the table. Mrs Armstrong thanks him and continues typing rapidly on her keyboard.

“You seem stressed.”

Mrs Armstrong sighs deeply as she massages her temples. “Is that what it looks like?”

Uh oh. There’s that tone. Clay isn’t brave enough to think of something smart to say. “I think you should take a break.”

“Take a break?” Mrs Armstrong looks at him as if he has two heads. “Take a break and lose my

promotion?”

“If you work when you’re tired, you’re more likely to make mistakes,” Clay says, mustering all his courage and settling down in the seat beside her.

Mrs Armstrong seems to consider this statement. She sighs once more, one of defeat, and closes her laptop. She sips at her tea as awkward silence reigns in the dining room.

“So,” Mrs Armstrong says, “I found a clump of cat hairs on the couch. Mind if you explain that?”

Clay freezes.

“How long has the cat been living in our house without my knowledge?”

“It’s, uh, not very long,” Clay says guiltily. “Just a few days...” She probably isn’t aware of Floris’ presence yet, so that’s a good thing. “It was a stray, and it was injured, so I brought it in...”

“Strays carry all kinds of diseases,” Mrs Armstrong says sternly. “It infringed on the health and safety of everyone in this household.”

Clay bites his lip.

“In any case,” Mrs Armstrong says, “I brought the cat to the vet. It’s clean, and they helped patch up its wound.”

Clay’s jaw drops. Who knew?

“I’d very much prefer it if you did not hide secrets from me again,” Mrs Armstrong says. “As your guardian, I’d like to think that there’s some trust between us.”

Well, there certainly is. Clay nods.

“How are you planning on spending your summer holidays?”

Clay blinks, looking up at her. “Uh...” Steal Gina’s heart. Save his team from the jeopardy of potential arrest. “We might be going to the beach?”

“I see,” Mrs Armstrong says. She reaches for her purse and presses a couple of bills into his hand. “I don’t think you packed your swimming trunks, so you should go and purchase one.”

Clay stares at the money in his hand, then back at Mrs Armstrong. There’s no way he needs this money, not with a few thousand dollars extorted from Shadows, but he is unable to reject the offer without seeming too suspicious.

“Thanks,” Clay says, flashing her a grateful smile and Mrs Armstrong returns a warm one.

Clay leaves her to her work, heading up to his room. Nick is on his phone, while Floris is staying on the other side of the room from Ant. Ant is contentedly curled up in its bed by the door, keeping its bandaged paw tucked close to its body.

When Clay settles into bed, his phone buzzes. He unlocks it and opens up the Phantom Thieves’ group chat.

Zak: you know Im just curious

Zak: how does gina have a palace?

Nick: she's not a bad person, per se

George: shes not

Eret: Palaces are born from someone's distorted desires, correct?

Eret: Perhaps Gina's Palace is born from her wanting to end her life

Me: in that case, we have to save her asap

Darryl: agreed

Clay lays on his bed and places his phone back on the shelf. He kicks the blanket to one side, doing his best to stave off the sweltering heat as he falls into a dreamless slumber.

Chapter End Notes

Empress arcana rank 6 -> 7 (Mrs Armstrong)

Some more terms that George may use but tbh not very important:

Dia/Diarama/Diarahan (healing)

Tarukaja (Attack UP)

Rakukaja (Defense UP)

Sukukaja (Accuracy/Evasion UP)

Tarunda (Attack DOWN)

Rakunda (Defense DOWN)

Sukunda (Accuracy/Evasion DOWN)

Tetrakarn (reflect Phys/Gun)

Makarakarn (reflect magic)

Challenge Accepted

Chapter Summary

recovering from the palace run

Chapter Notes

i have not yet watched the newest manhunt i promised to watch it with my brother after his exam on thursday

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

7/28 – TUESDAY – DAYTIME

“Zak. Explain.”

Zak pouts. “I don’t like that tone.”

Clay folds his arms, wondering how long and hard he has to sigh to put his point across. He and Zak are sitting in a wooden boat, paddled out to the middle of the lake in Helen Park, a sketchpad in Zak’s hands. The boat rocks with the gentle waves.

“I want to depict desire,” Zak says. “So I thought: desire leads to love, right?”

“Uh...”

“Shush,” Zak says, a finger on his lips. “That was a rhetorical question.”

Clay snaps his mouth shut.

“Anyway, I thought this is a very romantic place to be,” Zak says. “Your job here is to keep the boat steady while I find muses to draw.”

“Why not just draw Darryl since you have this pathetic crush on him?”

“He flat out refused.” Of course Zak tried. What was Clay thinking? “And my crush isn’t pathetic, unlike your *thing* for George.”

“Excuse me. I think my love life is progressing better than yours.”

“Oh, quiet! I can’t even hear myself think!” Zak yells, waving his sketchpad and pencil in the air.

“I am the loud one?”

“Oh, shhh!” Zak shushes Clay, eyes trained on another boat floating a distance from them. A man and woman are seated on the boat, with the man holding the oars.

“Are they lovers...?”

Clay wants to hide his face. He prays with all his heart that they don't just turn around and see a sketchy young man staring creepily at them. If that happens...

"Hey! Stop moving! I can't draw you like this!"

Why.

"What are you-" the man starts.

"Are you drawing us?" the woman asks.

"Yeah," Zak says. "A depiction of the purest love between two people, bound by the red string of fate, stemming from the wildest desires of the heart!"

"What?" the man glances from Zak to the woman and back to Zak. Clay is absolutely grateful that they either have yet to notice him, or is choosing to ignore him. "We're not lovers."

"Huh? Then why're you on this boat?"

Clay wants to scream.

"I told you this is going to give people the wrong idea," the man turns to the woman, who merely chuckles. "We're siblings. I guess you can call it sibling love?"

"Siblings?" Zak drops his pencil. He scrambles for it and recovers quickly. "So, love can come in many forms..."

"Yeah, I guess you could say that," the man says. He narrows his eyes. "Are you two...?"

"Me? With this guy? Nah," Zak says. "We're acquaintances."

That day, after the siblings have left, Clay, on complete accident, capsized their boat.

*

7/28 – TUESDAY – EVENING

"Hey."

Clay waves as greeting and moves to place his bag in the break room, the unfinished gun laid out on the workbench before him. Right. He was in the middle of making this submachine gun for Darryl. Is it just him or is it harder to assemble than a pistol or a revolver?

"You look happier," Clay says, stepping out behind the counter.

"You think?" Phil asks. Yup, he's clearly cheerier. "Well, it's a whole series of things, actually, that happened."

"Like what?"

"It's weird, you know. About how Scott was reinstated, about how the Chief of Police wrote me a legitimate letter of apology, and that he would leave myself and Tommy alone," Phil says, unable to keep the grin off his face.

"That's great, isn't it?" Clay says with a smile. The relief radiating off Phil is contagious.

“Yeah, now I can continue pursuing the case without any worries,” Phil says. “I mean, compile evidence and stuff. I already know the perpetrator, so...”

“Do you need my help?”

Phil laughs. “Not this time. You’ve helped out a lot, kid.”

Clay beams. Phil’s phone rings, and Tommy’s name flashes on the screen.

“One moment.” Phil picks up and Tommy’s energetic voice rings out on the other end. Clay isn’t sure what they’re talking about, but it seems that their relationship has improved somewhat...

When there are no customers in the store, he retreats to work on that submachine gun...

*

[7/29 – WEDNESDAY – DAYTIME](#)

“And why are we here again?”

“Shopping,” Darryl says. “We’ve taken it upon ourselves to buy you a new wardrobe.”

“Yeah. You wear the same stinky green hoodie everywhere you go,” Nick says. The original members of the Phantom Thieves are gathered at Pointe Boulevard, a busy shopping street located near a jetty that overlooks the massive ocean.

“What do you mean ‘stinky’?”

“As someone who hangs out in his bag all day every day,” Floris says, “I can confirm that it is stinky as fuck.”

“Language!”

“Don’t lie!”

“Anyway, don’t you just get bored of wearing that all the time?” Darryl asks loudly. “Look! Switch up your colours a little! Go wild!”

Nick blinks. “I think that’s the opposite of ‘switching up your colours a little’.”

“You know what I mean,” Darryl says. “Come on, I need to get Rat some new clothes too.”

“It’s summer. Rat’s going to die from the heat,” Clay says.

“As a fox, I can confirm that.”

“What happened to being a human?”

“I’m a human trapped in a fox’s body.”

The day is spent exploring Pointe Boulevard, walking past the shops and seeing what they have to offer. All in all, it was fun to walk and chat, entering stores and trying on random clothes.

Clay leaves the street with a blue hoodie and some lighter-coloured jeans. Oh, and a new pair of swimming trunks handpicked by Darryl (of all people) that supposedly shows off his daring side. Shocking pink with neon yellow lightning bolts striking down its sides.

“Well now, wasn’t that fun?” Darryl says, huge shopping bags hanging from his arms.

“I never pegged you for the shopping kind, I’ll be honest with you,” Nick says. “Maybe, like, Zak or something.”

“He would have come along, but he said he’s busy,” Darryl says, shrugging. “He’s got to replace his brushes and sketchpad or something. He came home absolutely soaked yesterday.”

“Gee, I wonder why,” Clay says, feigning innocence.

Darryl raises a brow.

[“So, anyway,”](#) Nick says, the only unfortunate one who ended up buying nothing at all, “we’ve got a long day ahead of us tomorrow. Wanna head back for today?”

“Ah, sorry,” Clay says. “I’m meeting up with Blade later.”

“Oh, that asshole detective.”

“Language,” Darryl scolds. “Besides, he’s not that bad. It’s just that he has different views from us.”

“I mean, yeah.” Nick purses his lips.

“Yeah, I get it,” Darryl says. “The way he just denounced us on national TV…”

“Well, now the tables have turned,” Floris says. “People are starting to like us way more now. Blade’s getting destroyed.”

“Let’s not get so high and mighty yet,” Darryl says. “Unless that Medjed threat is out of the way, we’re still not in the clear yet.”

They agree to split ways there and then, and Clay makes his way down to Beatty where he promised Blade that he’d play a couple of rounds of darts with him.

*

[7/29 – WEDNESDAY - EVENING](#)

“Seven-zero-one.”

“What?” Clay stares at Blade, who smirks. “That’s impossible and you know it.”

“Well, you just need a bulls-eye on every shot,” Blade says. “I don’t play anything less.”

“Now that’s just cruel.” Clay pouts. He sighs and keys in “7-0-1” into the darts machine number pad. The board lights up as the number “701” flashes onto the screen above it.

The game was intense, and, well, it was totally Clay’s loss. Blade has successfully gotten all bulls-eyes on his turns, while Clay’s darts were either slightly off, or really off.

“What the fuck,” Clay says, after the third game that night.

“Ready to call it quits?”

“*You* were the one who started this game!”

“But you continued it,” Blade points out.

That’s because Clay doesn’t want to be the deadweight in this unlikely co-op game. And there’s just something about continuously losing to this one man that infuriates him so badly.

“You know what, let’s settle this in billiards,” Blade says.

“You’re on,” Clay says firmly, and he ignores Blade’s laugh as they head over to the billiards table and grab their billiard sticks.

“One more game! One more!”

Blade leans against the table, a bored expression on his face with a hint of amusement. “You sure about this? That’s six straight losses in a row.”

“We have fifteen minutes left. Besides, you’re the one paying.”

“Fair enough,” Blade says. “One more, then.”

“Also, you’re playing with your left hand. That makes me even madder.”

“Playing with my...” Blade falls silent, then a smile creeps up his face. “You’re sharper than I gave you credit for. When did you notice?”

“The hand you used to play darts is your right, but you’re using your left when you play billiards,” Clay says. “Don’t go easy on me. It makes me angrier.”

“Tell you what,” Blade says. “I’ll play with my right hand when you’ve beaten me once.”

“Challenge accepted.” Ooh, Clay just wants to wipe that smirk off his face...

That night, Clay lost seven straight games of darts and billiards.

*

Chapter End Notes

Star arcana rank 1 -> 2 (Skeppy)

Hierophant arcana rank 7 -> 8 (Philza)

Proficiency +3 (working at the gun shop)

Priestess arcana rank 3 -> 4 (Technoblade)

Pyramid of Wrath: Infiltration Core

Chapter Summary

the chamber of rejection and guilt

Chapter Notes

how did i write those last 2 chaps so fast i have no idea

7/30 – THURSDAY – DAYTIME

“The Chamber of Rejection,” Dream mumbles, staring up at the words carved above the doorway. He wonders just what sort of puzzle and traps this chamber conceals.

There are relatively few Shadows wandering the twisting corridors. When the narrow passageway opens up to a much larger one, a hallway where the ceiling is at least three times higher than Dream, he notices someone standing the middle of it.

“Gina,” Navi breathes, before breaking into a run. “Gina!”

Shadow Gina waits for them in the middle of the hallway, that same unsettling blank expression on her face. She turns her back on them and begins to float away, silk trailing behind her.

A sheen of silver grabs Dream’s attention. So thin a thread that it is nearly invisible.

“George!” Dream leaps forward, grabbing Navi’s hand and dragging him back. Navi jerks back at the sudden force just in time for an arrow to miss his face. It slices the tip of his nose, drawing a sliver of blood. A barrage of arrows sail through the air in front of their faces. If they had moved any closer, they would have been stabbed like meat at a butcher’s.

The group is silent, and the arrows stop singing after a few more seconds. What must be hundreds of arrows litter the ground, shafts splintered, metal tips all bent out of shape.

“I guess we’re not going that way,” Skeppy says after a long while of complete silence.

“Then let’s check this out,” Eret says, gesturing to another hallway to their right.

The Shadows seem to have increased in number as well as strength, making their journey just a little tougher than anticipated. They find another statue of Anubis holding onto a glowing sphere similar to the one that the other statue had in its possession the other day.

“It says the same thing,” Eret says, reading off the stone slab beside the statue. “A curse will befall us if we take it.”

“Last time the floor collapsed,” Bad says, shaking his head. “Now what? We’re going to get shot?”

“Anything can happen,” Dream says. “Navi, are there any other exits?”

Navi touches the sides of his goggles and bathes the room in a green light. The light fades, and Navi shakes his head. “No. There’s only one exit, and that’s the hallway we just came from.”

Hmm...

“Guys, prepare your Pearls,” Dream says. He closes his fingers around the sphere and lifts it from Anubis’ hand.

Nothing happens.

“Something changed outside,” Navi says, a green holographic screen floating in front of him.

“Nothing terribly bad happ-“

[The sarcophagi](#) around them burst open, hulking Shadows wrapped in rotten and fraying bandages stalk towards them, movements jerky, like something out of a horror movie.

Dream doesn’t do too well with horror movies.

“Shit!” Skeppy summons Goemon and draws his katana. The temperature around them drops by a couple of degrees, sending shivers down Dream’s spine. Fundy severs a few Shadows in two with his sickles of wind. Several Shadows burn up in Carmen’s flames and Eret strikes down a couple more with Robin Hood’s arrows.

Dream summons Andras and pierces two Shadows with its claws. Where are all these mummies coming from? There’s no end to them!

“Dream, behind you!”

Dream is bathed in a green light. Everything slows around them as he whirls around, a Shadow’s claw inches from his face. He raises his pistol just in time to block the attack. His other hand reaches for his dagger, bringing it up in a clean arc and ripping the Shadow in two. Black blood sprays all over him, sizzling and burning as the Shadow dissolves into ash.

Dream hisses, summoning Isis and healing himself of the burn marks. The slow-motion effect wears off, and the battle continues as per normal.

“Rush for the exit!” Navi shouts. “There are too many of them!”

Sapnap summons a small thundercloud, bolts of lightning raining down on several Shadows near the exit. Skeppy and Bad mow down the remainder in their way with a dance of ice and fire, freezing Shadows on the left and cooking foes on their right.

Dream runs first, blasting a couple of stragglers. Clouds of ash burn around them. Eret takes up the rear, the sound of gunshots ringing out through the chamber.

Once out in the passageway, Skeppy summons an ice wall that seals off the chamber. Dream is panting, hands on his kneecaps as he tries his hardest to catch his breath.

“I’m never...holy...” Sapnap leans against the wall.

Navi hops out of Necronomicon, the Persona fading away.

“Are you guys alright?” Navi asks.

“Fine,” Fundy says. With a wave of his paw, a green shroud descends upon them, wounds sustained closing up in a matter of seconds. Dream jolts at the loud thump from the ice barrier. A tiny crack begins to form, getting bigger and more jagged with each punch against it.

“We gotta move!” Dream leaps to his feet. “Back to the stair-“

“No!” Navi spins his heels, facing the opposite direction. “This way!”

“What? That is where the arrows-“ Bad shouts, making a grab for Navi’s wrist, missing him entirely.

Then, a scream. Dream turns around, only to find Sapnap having fallen to the ground, collapsed in a tangle of limbs.

“Sapnap!”

Another click. An arrow misses Sapnap’s head by inches, breaking against the wall beside his head, beside his *bleeding neck*. Bad is already by Sapnap’s side, dragging him away from the sudden barrage of arrows that weren’t there before.

Crack...

Bad conjures wisps of green, gently easing the arrow lodged in Sapnap’s throat. Sapnap’s eyes are hazy, unfocused, blood gurgling at his mouth. Fundy scampers up to them, weaving healing magic of his own.

Thump! Crack...

Bad tosses the arrow to the side which clatters to the ground. The hole on Sapnap’s neck begins to close, the crimson red seeping back into his skin.

Crash!

A flurry of Shadows pour from the room. Eret throws up a forcefield, smiting any Shadow that gets too near, but wanes fast. Skeppy cleans up those that Eret misses, cutting off heads with his katana. Dream shoots one that gets too near. With Fundy’s help, Bad hoists Sapnap up onto his back and at Navi’s direction, they begin to run.

Dream calls upon Sandman, forming a barrier of wind that complements Eret’s forcefield. Shadows stagger after them, hobble, amble like the zombies they are. Some burst into faster Naga and Lamia, while some remain their freakish mummy forms.

“Dream! Eret!”

Dream shoots a Shadow through the neck, the monster bursting into ash. He glances up to find Navi hovering over them.

“This way!”

Eret shoots his last Shadow and the two sprint down the hallway, footsteps thunderous, but no louder than the mindless chittering of the Shadows chasing them.

Navi is the last one through the door, having to dismiss Necronomicon before he can fit through the gap in the wall. Bad and Skeppy slam the two levers by the door down and the door shuts with a bang, scattering clumps of sand everywhere.

[The room](#) is silent. No shrieking of Shadows, no dragging limbs nor flayed flesh trailing behind their bodies in goops. Sapnap lays on the lid of a coffin, an arm thrown over his stomach. The wound in his neck is gone, but blood stains the side of his mouth.

Once Dream finds the strength in his legs to move again, he approaches Sapnap, who's still unconscious. Probably passed out from the shock of it all.

"There's a safe room up ahead," Navi says. "Let's head on over."

*

["Hey,](#) are you okay?"

Sapnap blinks blearily. "Where are we?"

His hand flies up to his neck where the arrow struck him, breathing an audible sigh of relief when he realizes that there's nothing there.

"Safe room," Eret says.

"You can rest for as long as you need," Bad says. "We're in no hurry."

"I think I just got shot," Sapnap sits up, grinning, hand sliding down to his nape.

"Don't joke about something like this," Dream says, an edge to his tone. "You nearly died."

Sapnap goes silent, a frown replacing that smile, and the atmosphere turns heavy. No one dares to speak. Not until Eret clears his throat.

"There's no clear way out of this pyramid," Eret says. "We're going to have to solve the puzzle of this chamber, at least, before we can leave."

The Thieves agree. They rest up, each member taking a corner of the room. Dream is seated on the hard, wooden bench, sand sprinkled on its surface. Slightly less than an hour into their infiltration and one of his members almost *died*.

Could it have been his lapse of judgement? As the leader, he should have been- Dream snaps his head up at the sudden shadow in front of him, startling Navi.

"Sorry. Just wanted to know how you're doing," Navi says bashfully. "You look sort of down."

"Oh, it's nothing," Dream says. Navi sits down next to him.

"You remember what you said about how you'd listen to me if I ever need you to?" Navi asks. Dream nods stiffly. "Well, I'd be here whenever you need a listening ear as well."

Warmth floods Dream's chest. He glances back down at the ground, trying but failing to hide the idiotic smile on his face.

[Once](#) Sapnap is ready and raring to go, the Thieves decide to continue their infiltration, heading down a lengthy corridor and coming to another sand-filled chamber with a pedestal, the same one they saw in the Chamber of Sarcophagi. Dream places the glowing sphere in its indent and the wall disappears, revealing once more the same chamber with the inactivated mirror.

Touching the stone slab by the mirror brings the electronic screen to life. The colours are different this time. The tints are duller, the hues not as pronounced.

The puzzle takes them a shorter amount of time to solve this round. What greets them is an awful image. A woman slapping a boy while a girl and an infant watch on in terror.

“You useless children! You can’t do anything right!”

It’s that woman’s voice again. It’s shrill and sharp, like a stake is being driven through Dream’s ears.

“Get out of my sight or I’m going to kill all of you!”

Navi flinches beside him.

The voice is gone as suddenly and quickly as it had come. The ballista fires, bolt piercing the wall which crumbles into dust. The ray of light emitted from the mirror hits the green door, and it slides into the ground, permitting them access to the next part of the staircase.

“Come on, let’s go,” Fundy says, and the group jump from the hole to the floor below.

*

Another green door and another hallway stand before them. The unlit corridor brings them to a chamber grander than the few they had come to. A long slope lies to their left, and Shadow Gina stands in its middle. Seriously, that expressionless face is going to give Dream nightmares...

As soon as she notices that she is spotted, Shadow Gina begins to glide away up the slope. Dream chases her halfway when she disappears, not even leaving a trace of her presence.

A sudden rumbling knocks Dream’s feet from under him and he falls on his rear. When he lifts his head, all he sees is a massive boulder covered in green marks rolling down the slope towards them, gaining speed with every revolution.

“Get back!” Skeppy yells. Dream doesn’t need telling twice. He scrambles to his feet and begins to run back the way they came, the other Thieves already seeking shelter in the passageway. The boulder rolls past them, destroying part of the wall on the other side.

“That was unpleasant,” Eret says.

“I think that’s the right way to go,” Dream says, humming. “But we’re going to have to find a way to stop the boulders first.”

“Boulders?” Sapnap asks.

“If she wants to keep us away, it wouldn’t make sense to only prepare one boulder, right? Besides, she can do anything she wants in this Palace. It’s hers, after all,” Bad says.

“Yeah, but don’t you think this is less of an infiltration and more of a...a puzzle-solving trip or something?” Skeppy says, fingers behind his head. “I mean, she knows we’re here. She’s literally waiting at every corner.”

Dream emerges from the hallway. Bad’s probably right. If she wants to stop them, those boulders are just going to keep coming. Perhaps there’s a mechanism there that they can activate to halt it. Navi strides over the wall scratched by the boulder, to find a narrow crawlway. It’s a tight squeeze, but Dream is certain they can fit.

Dream is the first one through, and he is dazzled by the blinding gold before him.

“Whoa,” Fundy breathes.

The sight *is* breathtaking. The bricks are made entirely of gold, and not from the light-coloured sandstone they are getting so tired of seeing. Several holographic machines are lined up in two rows in the middle of the chamber, globes of red and blue illuminated above them.

“What does this do?” Sapnap wonders, peering up at the globes.

“What does this *say*?” Eret wonders, walking over to a stone slab flanked by the machines.

“B10101 and R01010?”

“‘B’ and ‘R’ probably mean ‘blue’ and ‘red’,” Navi says.

“What about the ones and zeroes?” Skeppy asks. “They’re so...random.”

“I have an idea,” Dream says. He walks over to the machines and switches every alternate one off for both rows. On, off, on, off and on for the blue row, and off, on, off on and off for the red row.

“Okay, try it now, Eret.”

Eret presses the stone slab and the slab’s engravings glow orange. The globes vanish, presence replaced by a roar. The roar of...a boulder.

“Hey! The boulders!” Sapnap points out. Through a demolished part of the wall from the first boulder, they are able to witness a multitude of boulders rolling past them, rocking the very pyramid itself. Holy shit, what the hell did they just do?

“Eret, stop it! Stop the boulders!” Skeppy yells.

“What the-“ Eret starts, at a loss for words for once. He presses the slab again and the orange gleam returns. Instead of stopping, however, the boulders begin to increase in number and speed. If the pyramid wasn’t about to collapse before, it is going to soon if they don’t find a way to stop the boulders!

“Oh my God, kick it!”

The slab breaks apart with a well-aimed kick, shattering into pieces of stone and dust. The boulders begin to slow, until finally, they stop. Dream heads over to the crawlway they had come through earlier, only to find it totally blocked by boulders.

“Now we can’t get back,” Fundy says. “What do we do?”

“Hold on,” Navi says. He scans the room, a pool of green by his feet. He glances up at the wall, through the hole the first boulder created. “There should be a ledge up there.” He gestures to said platform.

“Then we can walk across the boulders,” Bad says, clapping. “Am I a genius or what?”

“Yeah, you go, Bad!” Skeppy cheers.

Dream’s grappling hook takes him up to the platform and he takes a tentative step on the first boulder, ensuring that it wouldn’t just start rolling and taking him with it into a dark abyss. Dream makes his way up the slope with lithe steps and graceful leaps.

The top of the slope is nothing but a giant doorway that opens up to another familiar chamber. The one with the mirror. Dream presses the slab and gets to work.

The picture this time illustrates the same young girl and her older brother on the ground beside a house aflame. Neither the woman nor the younger boy is anywhere to be seen.

“I will burn this place to the ground! Mark my words!”

Dream doesn't care for the voice now. He can only stare in horror at the atrocious scene before him. At the faces of utter fear of the two children.

“If I can't have happiness, then no one...absolutely no one...deserves happiness...”

Dream glances at Navi, whose back is turned to the screen. Those words resound throughout the chamber, and the screen blinks the scene away. The mirror shines its radiant ray through the hole the ballista smashed in the wall. The green door opens, sinking beneath the ground with a deafening rumble.

“How horrible...” Bad mumbles, tearing his gaze away from the blank screen.

“Let's...” Navi swallows. “Let's go.”

“Let's not,” Dream says. “Navi, do you-“

“We can go,” Navi says, turning to face Dream, voice cracked. “We have to save G-“

“George.”

Navi pauses. He fidgets uncomfortably with his sleeve. “It's Navi.”

“Navi, we should go,” Dream says. “We will come back soon. I promise you.”

Navi looks apprehensive. The rest of the Thieves are silent. Navi sighs, scratching his head. “If everyone's tired, I guess we can leave for now.”

Dream nods. He turns to the rest of the Thieves. “We'll come back on...on Saturday. If that's fine with all of you.”

“No problem,” Sapnap says. “I'm always up for some infiltration.”

“Well then,” Dream says, approaching the ledge. He drops to the ground below, landing with nary a sound. “Let's get outta here.”

You Sound Like A Target

Chapter Summary

s links

Chapter Notes

wassup im back

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

7/30 – THURSDAY – EVENING

“Ant?”

Ant is sitting at the sill, staring longingly out the window. Maybe keeping it cooped up in here isn’t the best course of action, but it still needs some time for its paw to heal.

“You wanna go out there?”

Ant stares at Clay for a while, then hops off the sill, almost landing wrong on its injured paw. Clay is by his side in a second, pulling Ant up against his chest. Ant doesn’t struggle as Clay leaves the house, locking the door behind him.

The sun is settling behind the hills, waning light casting a magnificent pinkish glow on the sky and clouds.

Clay lets Ant down when Ant begins to paw at his arm. Ant’s gait is still somewhat wobbly, but carries itself just fine. Clay follows Ant for a while, because the cat seems to know where it is going.

They eventually reach an overgrown path that Clay did not even realize was there, obscured by shrubbery. Clay brushes the bushes aside, ducking beneath the trees and following Ant down the mossy stone road.

It opens up to an extremely quiet street that instils in Clay the jitters. Not even the singing of crickets, the shouts of his neighbours’ children nor the roaring of car engines. Ant plods bravely down the path, however, and Clay sees what appears to be a small church come into view.

The church is in shambles, as if it has been completely disregarded for a good number of years. Ant yowls as it approaches the chapel. Is this where Ant lives?

Ant meows again, softer this time. It waits by the front door, tail curled up against its body. No answer.

If Clay were to hazard a guess...he presses his lips in a thin line, and carefully pushes the doors open. They take a bit of effort and a resounding creak, but they do open, revealing a large chamber,

a brick-red carpet leading up to a pulpit flanked by pews. An organ stands at a corner near the pulpit.

Ant surveys the room, tail swinging from side to side. It meows again, even weaker this time, and turns around, leaving the church. Honestly speaking, Clay's cowardly ass doesn't want to remain here longer than necessary, so he heads out and closes the door, praying that he didn't just make an enemy out of a restless spirit.

Clay carries Ant home, the cat fast asleep in his arms even as he deposits it onto its bed.

"Where'd you go?" Nick asks, Switch in hand, a calming music playing from it.

"I brought Ant out on a walk," Clay says.

Floris makes an indignant sound, his back turned to them. What's his problem? It's not like Clay takes Ant on Palace runs instead. Clay climbs the steps to his bed and lays down, pooped from the Palace run they had today.

Floris stays on the other side of the bed, instead of laying down beside Clay as per usual. It's not that Clay minds, though. At least he won't wake up to Floris sprawled all over his face.

*

7/31 – FRIDAY – DAYTIME

"Clay, can you help me with something?"

Darryl's voice is hardly audible over the thunderous storm outside. Clay leans in. "What?"

"I asked you whether you can help me with something."

"Depends on what it is," Clay says, leaning back against his chair.

"Well, it's...I just need you to start swearing."

Clay blinks at him. Darryl stares back expectantly. Clay opens his mouth and closes it, then opens it again like a fish.

"Well, what are you waiting for?"

"It's just..." Clay isn't sure how to respond to this. He rubs the nape of his neck. "You actually have a physical aversion to swearing."

"That's the whole point," Darryl says, fidgeting. "I'm trying to train my spirit, you know, since Carmen's strength is dependent on the strength of my heart, right?"

"That's true," Clay says. "But I'm not sure this is gonna help."

"Never know till we try," Darryl says, shrugging.

"Well...shit."

Darryl flinches. "Go on."

"Uh...bitch."

Darryl pinches himself, a hand clenched into a fist. “One more.”

“Fu-“

“Okay, I have to stop you right there,” Darryl says, holding up a hand and grimacing. “I don’t think my heart can take any more of this.”

“Do you feel yourself getting stronger?”

Darryl thinks for a moment. “I’d like to think it did, but...”

“Yeah, didn’t think so,” Clay says, looking up when a waitress approaches him. His egg mayonnaise croissant is finally here. He thanks her and turns back to Darryl. “What brought upon this sudden...request?”

[“Oh, uh...](#)I went to see Adrian during rehab some time ago,” Darryl says, “and it’s got me thinking. He was in so much pain, you know. His face was so red, he was so tense, and every step looked so excruciating. It was agonizing to watch...” He trails off, chewing on his lip. “But at the same time I was inspired.”

“Inspired to get stronger?”

“Yeah,” Darryl says. “Even after all that he’s endured, he’s working so hard to recover. I’ve got to be someone worthy of that strength, so I’m going to try to improve myself as well.”

“That’s admirable. I don’t mind helping you with this.”

“Aw, thank you.” Darryl grins. Soon, his ravioli arrives and they dig in.

*

[7/31 – FRIDAY – EVENING](#)

“Doesn’t he just look wicked to you?” Yao Yi pushes her phone into Clay’s face. “Come on, stop ignoring me!”

“You said you had a legitimate target for me,” Clay says. “Why is it more of this bullshit?”

“What bullshit? I got the information from reliable sources!” Yao Yi huffs.

“You mean *rumours* and tabloids,” Clay says. He’s not going to budge on this. “It’s the same as that actor the other d-“

“Oh, look who it is. It’s the loser bitch.”

[Yao Yi](#) freezes. Clay looks up and sees a girl walking over. The same girl that had picked on Yao Yi the other day and flirted with him. What was her name again? Beth? Clay glances around discreetly for her posse, but she seems to be alone this time round.

“What do you want, Beth?” Yao Yi asks, fiddling with her phone.

“Oh, I dunno,” Beth says, blowing a lock of hair out of her face. Is it just Clay or does she look tired? “Just saw a zero here. Thought I’d show the zero her place.”

Yao Yi visibly wilts.

“Sorry, mind leaving us alone?” Clay asks. “You’re being rather rude.”

“You know, you should really leave Cheng. She’s such a loser,” Beth says, winking at him. “I’m always available, pretty boy.”

Clay watches as she stalks off, headed out of the diner. Yao Yi unlocks her phone and begins typing furiously. Clay furrows his brows as he continues shoving mashed potato into his mouth. His phone buzzes, and Clay notices a text message from Yao Yi.

“What is that?”

“I just sent you Beth’s information,” Yao Yi says. “And I posted a warning on the Phan-Site.” She slips her phone back into her pocket. “You’ll take care of her, right?”

Clay doesn’t like the sound of that. “Take care”, she said. He sighs. “Cheng, this is going too far.”

[“Going](#) too far?” Yao Yi asks, eyes widening a fraction, something unhinged behind those orbs. “You call this going too far? You saw how she targeted me. Us! You...”

“Cheng!” Clay hisses. “Just stop it now, alright? You’ve been so suspicious of everyone. You’ve been sending me information on people who don’t even need their hearts changed.”

“But this...” Yao Yi shoots back. “This is all I can do! With this, I can become more than a zero. I can finally...I won’t get picked on anymore!”

“You know what you’re sounding like?” Clay fixes her with the most intense glare he can muster. “You’re sounding like one of our targets, Cheng.”

That’s when Yao Yi shuts up, her eyes wider, rounder, as large as dinner plates. She giggles, a certain madness in the tinkle. “You’re joking.”

Clay frowns. “I’m not, but believe it if you want to.”

“Are you...” Yao Yi averts her gaze. “Are you going to steal my heart?”

“Maybe.”

Yao Yi leaves without another word, grabbing her coat and bag and just storming off. Clay sighs, scratching his head. This is something he’s going to have to discuss with the rest of the Thieves.

*

Chapter End Notes

Devil arcana rank 1 -> 2 (AntFrost)
Kindness +3 (taking care of AntF.)
Lovers arcana rank 4 -> 5 (BBH)

Pyramid of Wrath: Infiltration Finale

Chapter Summary

chamber of sanctuary

Chapter Notes

hello im back this is pretty short tbh and uneventful

also i watched the new manhunt and I AM AMAZED

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

8/1 – SATURDAY – DAYTIME

The final chamber stands before them, the Chamber of Sanctuary. The sandstone corridor leads to a chamber filled with floating holographic images, the digits “1” and “0” scrolling by them at ultra-speeds.

“The mirror’s there,” Navi says, pointing to a platform at the far end of the chamber. It would have been easy if not for the fact that there is a giant chasm separating them from it. Impassable by both grappling hook and Ender Pearl it seems, and Dream is not willing to chance a drop to the abyss below.

“Let’s find another way across,” Bad says. “Ooh, there’s a door there.”

Eret pulls the lever and the door slides open, revealing a passageway flanked by sarcophagi. An involuntary shiver travels down Dream’s spine as they make their way down the corridor. The tension is high amongst their group, despite Navi’s reassurances that there are no Shadows in the vicinity.

Thankfully, they make it to the staircase at the end without any confrontation, allowing them to ascend to the next level.

“Shadow to your left,” Navi says. Dream presses his back against the wall, listening out for the Shadow’s irregular footsteps.

Thump. Thump.

Now.

Dream whips out his pistol and puts a bullet through the Shadow’s head. The Shadow’s mouth is open in a silent scream before it bursts into ash. Dream jams his pistol back into its holster. A sharp bang to his right and Sapnap’s holding his shotgun, smoking at the barrel, a pile of ash by his feet.

“I’ve repaid my debt,” Sapnap says with a grin.

Dream smiles. “There was never a debt.”

The walls lead them round to a glass pane, gifting them a clear view of the Shadows patrolling various corridors and walkways, at the giant hole in the ground that they have to find a way to get around. The green numbers flashing by their eyes are distracting at best, and blinding at worst.

Dream tears his eyes from the rapid flick of the code and turns down a corridor that leads him out from the observation deck. A Shadow spots him and bursts into a group of Lamia. He takes them all out with a storm of ice, encasing them in the hardened shells of crystals that sparkle in the light.

One shot from each remaining Thief is enough to shatter the ice prisons, and the Lamia captured within. Gone is the threat, and they continue on, heading further down to the next chamber.

A statue of Anubis stands in the centre, its glowing orb seductive. Dream’s eyes dart around the room, noticing only two doorways – one that they had just entered from, and the other an exit to a featureless hallway spanning the rest of the length of the chamber.

“Any escape routes, Navi?”

Navi scans the area. “None.”

[Dream](#) takes a deep breath. He glances down the other hallway again, the “Everyone, I’d like you to stand there.”

“Huh?” Sappnap tilts his head. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I want you guys out of here,” Dream says. “I don’t know what’s going to happen.” The ceiling nearly touches Dream’s head. The cramped room is giving him mild claustrophobia. He isn’t sure what trap he’s going to trigger by removing this sphere, but...he can imagine.

The Thieves exchange glances.

“Dream, we can’t let you do this,” Bad says. “At least assemble a team-“

“No!” Dream snarls. An image of Sappnap bleeding out from his neck flashes into his mind. The way the arrow was lodged in his throat, the utter dread and terror that coursed through him the entire time he was recovering. “I can’t...”

He remembers the Thieves falling into the flowing sand pit on their first day here, the sheer panic that engulfed him like shadows of talons clawing at his chest, attempting to drag him under.

“I can’t let that happen to you all...”

The stab to the heart when he almost – had he been a second later – let Navi get pierced through the temple by that arrow trap. If he had noticed those traps earlier...if he’d *done* something...

“Hey, Dream. Dream, look at me.”

A pair of warm hands claps his shoulders, and Dream jerks from his trance.

“Calm down,” Eret says, in that soothing baritone of his. “Calm, Dream. Calm.”

Dream unclenches his fists, the crescents of pain dug deep into his skin. He follows the rhythm of Eret’s breaths. The rest of the Thieves are observing him, concern and worry evident in the way they’re standing stock-still, the way they stare at him, unblinking.

What was Dream thinking, losing himself like that? He's their *leader*, for God's sake.

"I'm fine," Dream says. He adjusts the mask on his face. "I...Fundy will stay here with me, then."

"Me?" Fundy looks confused.

"I'll stay," Navi says. "If a battle comes up, you're going to need me. That okay with you, Dream?"

Dream nods, releasing a shaky breath. He straightens his shoulders and addresses the team.

"So, the plan is this," Dream says. "When I grab the sphere, I'm going to throw it to you guys. See that pedestal all the way at the end?"

"Pedestal?" Skeppy turns around and notices a goblet set upon said pedestal. "Uh huh?"

"Fit the sphere in there," Dream says. "That should stop the curse. I'm counting on you."

"Are you sure about this?" Sapnap asks.

"I'll be fine," Dream says. "Now, go."

When half the team is outside the small room, Dream removes the sphere and immediately rolls it through the doorway, the sphere making it past the frame just as the doors rise from the ground, indestructible stone slabs impenetrable with conventional weapons. Not even their Personas can do anything about it.

The ceiling begins to lower, gears shrieking and turning.

"What the fuck!" Fundy cries.

"Dream! Behind you!"

A solid weight slams into Dream's body. Both he and Navi tumble to the ground. A blade of wind sails over their heads, severing that of the Kurama Tengu that had just manifested out of nowhere. The Anubis statue is also missing, and Dream can sort of put two and two together.

"Thanks Navi, Fundy."

The groaning and creaking of the ceiling is not helping matters, though. With every second, it gets nearer and nearer. Soon, it's going to crush them flat.

"Ooh boy," Fundy mumbles. Launching a flurry of wind blades at the door doesn't work. They dissipate as soon as they touch the door, bouncing off shields forged of glowing numbers. "We can't get out!"

"That's why I didn't want any of you here with me," Dream hisses.

"What, and allow you to suffer this fate alone?" Fundy hops up to him. "You're a fucking idiot that's what you are."

"They'll stop the curse, right?" Navi says. "You trust your friends."

"Yeah," Dream says with a smile, back to the wall as the ceiling comes down ever lower. "I trust them."

The ceiling is right above their heads, descending ever so slowly. Eventually, Dream ends up lying on his back on the hard, sandy ground, arms spread out. The Thieves will come through for him. For them. He just knows it.

When the ceiling touches his mask, it stops going lower. Instead, it does just the opposite. The stone slab rises, giving them space to breathe once again. It is only now that Dream is fully aware of the pounding of his heart against his chest, how clammy his palms are, how frantic his breathing is.

The doors open, and when the ceiling is high enough, Dream sits up. Navi does the same, brushing sand from his hair. Fundy shakes violently, spraying sand everywhere.

["Dream!"](#) Sapnap and Bad poke their heads through the doorway. "Holy shit! You almost died!"

"Sorry we took so long," Eret says. "There were a ton of Shadows."

Dream grins and gives them a thumbs-up. He lets Skeppy haul him to his feet. The glowing orb is visible in the darkness of the chamber ahead, set in the fancy pedestal.

"Look!" Fundy cries, rushing over to the ledge. Dream follows his gaze. As it turns out, the slotting of the sphere must have done more than stopped the ceiling from crushing them to death. A path formed of intricate glyphs suspended in the air allows them passage to another walkway at the other end of the chasm.

"It looks like a new area's opened up," Fundy says. "Let's go."

*

The new chamber consists of planets floating in space, surrounded by constellations of stars, aglow with the glare of an artificial sun. The planets are, interestingly enough, an amalgamation of sand and strings of numbers nonsensical to the untrained mind.

A piece of wooden scaffolding takes them up to the level of the planets with a simple pull of the grappling hook.

Leaping past the mass of planets takes them to the next chamber, fitted with the same mirror, the same ballista, the same stone slab of instructions and the same imposing electronic screen.

They repeat the same procedure, piecing together the scene that the puzzle wants to show them. A thick wall separates the boy and the girl. The girl's knees are drawn up to her chest with her back to the wall. The boy faces away, wearing a suit and carrying what appears to be a briefcase. Above them is the looming figure of a woman, an evil smile on her face.

The picture blinks away and the ballista twangs, the bolt blasting straight through the wall and completely eradicating it. The wall falls away with an ear-splitting bang and the mirror of light stabs through the air, striking the green door.

The green door sinks into the ground with a grumble, revealing what appears to be a tube, a futuristic elevator of sorts. At least they've gotten past the green doors. What else may be lying ahead?

*

"This is..."

Dream reaches out to touch the elevator, only to withdraw his hand at the slightest spark of electricity, a glyph of numbers formed where he made contact with the shield.

“We can’t proceed any further,” Fundy says. “It’s pretty much sealed.”

“What do we do now?” Eret asks, a hand on his chin.

“Hey, we saw something like this before,” Bad says. “Back in Marion’s Palace, right?”

“Marion’s Palace?”

“Yeah.” Sapnap nods, arms folded. “The laser garden. We had to change the real Marion’s cognition to disable the lasers.”

“So we’ve to change Gina’s cognition to go deeper?” Navi asks.

“Something like that,” Dream says. Fundy angles his head up and sniffs the air. He turns towards the elevator.

“My sense of smell is telling me that the Treasure’s just behind this blockade,” Fundy says. “So, uh...I guess we’ll have to come back another day.”

“There isn’t much of the Palace left,” Navi agrees, pulling out his holographic map. “Just a simple chamber after this elevator, then the Treasure would be behind that. As for the door...I think this is the door to Gina’s room.”

“How’d you know that?”

“This is the only place that Gina has complete control over, given that she’s in her room every single day,” Navi says. He touches the elevator’s doors and manages to phase through it without incident.

“That would make sense if only you can enter,” Eret says. “In that case, we’ll have to try to get Gina to allow us into her room.”

“Yeah.” Dream turns back to face the entrance of the pyramid. “Now then, I think it’s time to return to the real world. Good job, everyone.”

The next time they come in, it will be after they have sent the calling card.

“Returning to the real world. Thank you for your hard work.”

*

Chapter End Notes

Dream's Persona stock (9/10):

- Sandman
- Lachesis
- Anzu
- Kurama Tengu
- Pisaca

- Zouchouten
- Naga
- Ara Mitama
- Isis

Summer Vacation Continues...

Chapter Summary

some s links

Chapter Notes

not sure if anyone's noticed, but fundy doesnt seem to comment on dream's actions anymore during his s links because, well, he chooses to stay home

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

8/1 – SATURDAY – EVENING

“Clay, what are your thoughts on having Nick’s father living in this house as well?”

Clay looks up from the stalks of spring onion that he is chopping. “Huh? I’m not sure why you’re asking me but I wouldn’t mind.”

“Really now?” Mrs Armstrong hums.

“Does that mean you’re getting back together?”

Mrs Armstrong shrugs. “It wouldn’t move so fast. I’m hoping to give it some time. See how it works out.”

“Have you spoken to Nick about this?”

“Of course,” Mrs Armstrong says. “When you were in the shower. He’s fine with it as well.” She pauses. “Well, about why I’d ask you...”

Mrs Armstrong pushes the diced pieces of meat into the pot of boiling water before walking around to inspect Clay’s diced vegetables.

“I think of you as part of the family now,” Mrs Armstrong says. “As someone that both myself and Nick can trust.”

Clay’s heart soars. It almost feels like he’s receiving the highest honour one can ever hope to receive, a badge that he can proudly wear upon his chest.

“Don’t forget the carrots,” Mrs Armstrong says, retrieving the thawed shrimp and dropping them into the water. Clay finishes up the spring onions and moves on to slicing the carrots.

*

8/2 – SUNDAY – DAYTIME

“Come on,” Phil says as he closes up shop. “Let’s go somewhere.”

“Go somewhere?”

“Yeah,” Phil says. “Tommy wanted to go see the fishes.”

“Fishes?”

“Yes, fishes. Wiggly things that swim in the water.”

“And I’m coming along?”

“Why not?” Phil asks. “It’s thanks to your help that I can spend time with Tommy like this.”

Realization dawns on Clay. “Oh.”

“Don’t worry. I’m sure you can get home before your appointment with Wilbur,” Phil says. “We’re not going far. Just around Reedveld.”

Tommy meets them at the entrance to the aquarium. Clay does a double take when he sees Blade there as well, having a lively conversation with Tommy bent over laughing.

“Hey,” Phil says, raising a hand. “Didn’t think you’d be here.”

“Well, Tommy *was* pretty insistent on it,” Blade says. “He said it’s a family outing. Well, minus Wilbur.”

“Wilbur’s got his deadline to meet,” Tommy says. “He said he can join us another time, though.”

Blade eyes Phil. “You *are* paying, right?”

Clay has never been to an aquarium before – his hometown didn’t have one. Seeing the multitude of iridescent fishes swimming by, right in front of his nose, the manta rays plastered on the glass dome above them, Clay is in awe.

[“How’re you enjoying it?”](#) Phil asks, walking up to him.

“Huh? Oh, I think...I think it’s awesome,” Clay says with a nod. “I’ve never been to an aquarium before.”

“Well, it’s best to enjoy your first time,” Phil says. “Especially with family and friends.” He glances over at Tommy who seems to be having a heated debate with Blade about...jellyfish, judging from the snippets of conversation that Clay overhears.

“By the way,” Phil says, “the next time I see you, Clay, I think I can say for certain that the case is closed.”

Clay nods and returns the broad smile Phil flashes him. Tommy runs over, yelling something about Blade being “hurtful” and how he’s “bullying” him.

It’s calming, he thinks, to watch them laugh, to tease each other, just like a family.

*

[8/2 – SUNDAY – EVENING](#)

“So, what do you think?”

“I think it’s good,” Clay says, handing the phone back. Wilbur’s face lights up. “Really.”

“I had to revamp it a lot,” Wilbur says, playing with a lock of hair. “Considering, well, the pressure.”

“Your deadline’s far away now,” Clay says. “You can continue to work on it at your own pace.”

Wilbur barks out a laugh. “You had no idea how close I was to just...” He pauses. “Can’t believe Ponk just extended the deadline by...by such a long period of time. Well, I’ve certainly been saved. By sheer coincidence.”

“That, you have.”

“And I’ve seen your results,” Wilbur says. “It’s grown by leaps and bounds. Soon, you’re not going to need me as a tutor anymore.”

“I’ve got you to thank.”

“Flattery gets you everywhere.” Wilbur flashes him a smile. “Well then, when I’m done, you can bet that you’ll be the first one to see my manuscript.”

“I’m looking forward to it.” Clay returns the smile.

That night, when Wilbur leaves, there is a spring in his step, a lightness in his gait that sharply contrasts that of the past few weeks. If Clay is being honest with himself, he’s rather excited to see this story till the end.

*

8/3 – MONDAY – DAYTIME

“Admittedly, I’ve never been here before,” Eret confesses as he and Clay exit the train station, entering Pointe Boulevard. Clay had only come around once with the boys the other day – the boys being Nick, Fundy and Darryl, that is – but Eret did mention, at some point in the past, that he wanted to find a specific pair of shoes...

What better place to start than the biggest shopping street in all of Fariold?

“We’ve got a lot of ground to cover,” Clay says. “Let’s get cracking.”

They spent a majority of their afternoon strolling about the boulevard, peering into boutiques, second-hand clothes shops and the like. They do enter a couple of shoe shops, but none of them seem to be selling the pair that Eret’s looking for.

“Maybe they’re only sold overseas?” Clay asks as they take a break from exploring the area, standing by the edge of the street near a belt shop.

“I don’t think so...” Eret purses his lips, looking up from his phone. “You know, I’ve heard a lot of talk about Medjed.”

“Yeah, so have I,” Clay says, an involuntary smile creeping up on his face. “They were all rooting for us.”

“It’s nice to have support.” Eret nods. “Even though we cannot acknowledge it directly. Speaking

of which, when are we planning to send out that calling card?"

"I...definitely before the seventeenth," Clay says. "I asked George last night. He said he'll try to persuade Gina to let us in, so we have to give him a couple of days."

"I see," Eret says. "Maybe we can train in Mementos in the meantime. Just a thought."

"So, what are these shoes you're looking for?" Clay asks as they resume their adventure. "You didn't actually send me a picture."

"Oh, uh..." Eret looks uncomfortable, refusing to meet Clay's gaze. He clears his throat. "They're platform boots. I saw them online, and...uh..."

"Platform boots...you mean those?"

Clay gestures to a shop tucked away in the backstreets of the boulevard. It's a little shabby, but displayed proudly by the window is a pair of black platform boots so high that Clay doubts anyone can even walk in that.

From the way it's caught Eret's attention, complete with the sparkle in his eye, Clay realizes they've struck gold.

"I don't know how you can even walk in that," Clay says, shaking his head as Eret meets with him by the entrance, sporting a content smile and a gigantic plastic bag dangling from his arm. "I mean, they're *seven inches*."

"I've owned a five-inch one before," Eret says, shrugging. "I can manage."

They take the same train back, and Eret gets off at an earlier stop.

"Thanks for coming with me today," he says, plastic bag crinkling as he fiddles with it. "I didn't know who else to ask."

"That's fine," Clay says. "I had fun."

Eret waves and disappears into the ever-shifting crowd. Clay pulls his phone out of his pocket to see a missed message from Tommy.

*

8/3 – MONDAY – EVENING

Clay hears sobbing. Sniffles carried by the evening summer zephyrs. Clay glances around. The road is deserted save for a woman trimming the leaves of her rose bushes.

Turning his head towards what he expected to be an empty playground, he finds a girl sitting on the swing who looks oddly familiar. She is all alone, blonde hair a dull golden in the light of the streetlamp, fingers curled loosely around the metal chains.

It's only when he approaches her that he recognizes who she is.

"Niki?"

Niki glances up at the sound of her name, her eyes wide with unparalleled fear, settling into a flood of relief when she realizes his identity.

“Clay.” Niki wipes at her eyes. “What are you doing here?”

“I live around here,” Clay says. He takes the swing next to her. “What about you?”

“I do too.” Niki chuckles. “It’s funny how I never see you on the train.”

“Maybe because I’m usually running late.”

Niki hums. “Maybe.”

They sit in silence for a while, the unspoken question hanging between them as Niki kicks lifelessly at the sand while the sun begins to descend beyond the houses and hills.

“The sunset’s really pretty,” Niki says, eyes trained on the warm sky, on the clouds floating freely above them with abandoned care.

“It is.”

“I wish this moment can last forever,” Niki says, a forlorn smile on her face. “Don’t you?”

She pushes herself off the swing, hair tousling in the breeze. “Well, I’ve got to get going. My mother’s waiting for me.” She doesn’t sound too enthusiastic. “I’ll see you around, Clay. Soon, hopefully.”

“See you around, Niki.”

Clay watches as she leaves, dragging her feet behind her as she makes for home. Clay stands.

Those bruises on her face and arms aren’t as well hidden as she thinks they are.

Chapter End Notes

Empress arcana rank 7 -> 8 (mrs armstrong)

Proficiency +3 (cooking)

Hierophant arcana rank 8 -> 9 (philza)

Proficiency +3 (helping at gun shop)

Tower arcana rank 7 -> 8 (wilbur)

Knowledge +3 (tuition)

Emperor arcana rank 2 -> 3 (eret)

Hanged Man arcana rank 4 -> 5 (niki)

if anyone's interested they're cooking pancit bihon

Pay For Me, B*tch

Chapter Summary

calling card will be sent soon

Chapter Notes

IDK WHY BUT I LOVE MY CHAPTER TITLE???

I hate stats what in the world is F-distribution

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

8/4 – TUESDAY – DAYTIME

“Will says I need to start reading more,” Tommy says, “so I need to pick out some books ‘my level’ that he wants to see next week or he’s going to kick my arse.”

“So you decided that inviting me along was the best course of action.”

“Yeah,” Tommy says, tapping his temple. “You’re a smart man. Think about it. Phil’s busy. You know that.”

He’s actually not, given how empty the store is most of the time, but Clay says nothing.

“And *Blade*? He’s just going to make fun of me.”

That’s true. Clay saw their dynamic first-hand. Blade would definitely eat Tommy for lunch with his quick wit.

“Tubbo’s busy with his competition and stuff,” Tommy says. “You’re kind of my last choice here.”

Ouch. Clay kind of figured, but hearing it from Tommy’s mouth is another type of hurt altogether.

“I don’t want to be standing out here in the hot sun any more than you do,” Clay says. “Let’s get this done and over with.”

The tiny town that Tommy has chosen to begin his book-searching adventure happens to be a small area populated by bookshops, a towering central library and cafes opened for students from the nearby college to study and relax. Most of these bookshops are old yet warm, crumbly yet cosy. Perhaps Clay should consider inviting someone out to study here one day...

“What do people your age read?” Tommy asks. “Wilbur told me to find a ‘classic’ or something. Aren’t classics those books written by ancient people?”

“Uh...something like that? There are modern classics too, you know. And I read...” What *does* Clay read? “Classics.”

“Oh, cool,” Tommy says with a disbelieving expression. Clay isn’t sure how to respond to that. “What books do you recommend?”

“What kinds do you like to read?”

“Something with violence.”

Clay sighs.

“This looks cool,” Tommy says, holding up a book that obviously belongs in the Young Adults section. Clay remembers reading that when he was in middle school. Percy Jackson...or something. “There’re people holding swords.”

“That’s not a classic.”

“Well, can it fool Wilbur?”

Clay stares at Tommy as if he’s grown two heads. “Nope. Go with something Shakespearean. There’s a fair amount of death in his stories.” He pushes the door open and walks up to the Classics section. He scans the shelves and pulls out a thick one, tossing it to Tommy.

“Isn’t Caesar the Roman guy?”

“Yeah,” Clay says. He remembers attempting to read it before, but never got very far. “There’re people holding swords in that one and they actually do die.”

“Okay, great,” Tommy says. “Can you pay for me, big man? I’ll just ask Phil to pay you back.”

“But-“

“It’s for my education. You don’t want me to grow up and go to juvie, right?”

Clay splutters.

“What I’m saying is: pay for me, bitch.”

Clay walks away from that store with a lighter wallet. It’s not that he really minds, considering he’s making a ton of money from his Metaverse exploits. On the bus ride back to Valentine’s, Tommy’s phone buzzes continuously. He takes one look at the screen then places it into his pocket.

[“Who’s that?”](#)

“Huh? Manifold,” Tommy says, fidgeting with the corner of the book. “He’s just being annoying. It’s the same thing every time. ‘Come back, Tommy, come back!’ To be honest, it’s really getting on my nerves.”

“What about calling the police?”

“On the Punz Family?” Tommy looks stunned. “You’ve never dealt with the mafia before, have you, Big D?”

“I did,” Clay insists. He catches himself before his big mouth betrays him. “Just, uh, not in the conventional sense.”

Tommy gives him a funny look. “Anyway, the police ain’t gonna do shit. But to be honest, I think they’re just gonna give up after a while.”

Clay can even hear the buzzing through Tommy's shorts.

"It's more irritating today, huh," Tommy says. "Ignore it."

"It's a little hard to ignore."

Tommy scrunches up his nose. "Just ignore it."

They fill the silence with small talk, about how Tommy wants to start making a career as a streamer, which he's not quite sure whether Phil will approve. They talk about microphones, cameras, keyboards...until they reach Valentine's. Clay grabs a quick dinner – a piping hot quesadilla - from a roadside shop and heads straight for Untouchable.

*

8/4 – TUESDAY – EVENING

Phil looks up when Clay steps into the store. "I have good news."

"Good news?"

"You remember Tabbs? The Police Chief?"

"Yeah?"

"Well, he turned himself in on account of two charges of first-degree murder," Phil says. "Scott said he couldn't handle the guilt and begged to be arrested. According to him, it was 'wild'."

"At least he can repent for what he did now," Clay says.

Phil hums. "Actually, that got me thinking. You know what it sounds like?"

"What sounds like?"

"This whole turning-himself-in thing," Phil says. "It sounds like what those Phantom Thieves are doing. Change of heart, you know?"

"It does, doesn't it?"

"I've gotta really thank them," Phil says, a sparkle in his eye. "So, thank you."

Clay freezes. "What?"

"There's no need to hide it," Phil says with a shrug. "It's obvious if you think about it. After giving you the full name of the Chief, he proceeded, almost immediately, to have a change of heart. The timing was too perfect."

"Oh...uh..." Clay breaks out into a cold sweat.

"It's fine," Phil says with a wave. "I'll turn a blind eye this time. I have no issue with your sense of justice." He beckons Clay over and deposits a shiny badge into his palm.

"Are you sure?" Clay asks.

Phil shakes his head. "I don't think I need it anymore. I'm permanently retired from the force. Think of it as a thank you for all that you've done for myself and Tommy."

Clay closes his fingers around the badge. It's smooth apart from the engravings on the front. It has been well-taken care of, despite Phil having been out of the force for a while.

"While you don't have to work here any longer," Phil says, "since you've got all your Phantom Thief duties to attend to, I'll be happy to continue selling you my bad boys." He makes a sweeping gesture to the guns. "It's nice to know what my weapons are being used for."

Clay returns his smile. "Thank you so much, Phil."

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast turned a vow into a blood oath. It shall become the wings of rebellion that break the yoke of thy heart. Thou hast awakened to the ultimate secret of the Hierophant, granting thee infinite power...

"It should be me who's thanking you," Phil says, laughing. "Now go get me a cup of coffee."

*

[Clay's](#) phone buzzes. He glances at the screen.

George: Gina has agreed to a meeting

George: The day after tomorrow

Me: We can send the calling card then. We'll have to enter her Palace straight after, though

Darryl: ok sure

Eret: we'll make final preparations tomorrow. Rest well everyone!

Me: did gina give a time

George: after 11 because she usually wakes up after 11

Me: then we'll go eat lunch first and meet up at george's house?

George: I promised to eat with her

George: so I will have to give it a miss

Eret: that's fine. We'll just meet up with you once we're ready

Darryl: we'll give you a call, George!

The conversation ends there. Clay's arm drops to his side, phone thumping on the mattress. In two days, they are going to steal Gina's heart.

*

[8/5 – WEDNESDAY – DAYTIME](#)

"Do you think these glasses will suit him?" Tubbo asks, picking up a pair of star-shaped glasses and inspecting it from every angle.

"Who?"

“My dad,” Tubbo says. “Seriously, his glasses are already bent and shit. It’s a miracle he can still wear them.”

“Don’t you need prescription?” Clay asks.

“Oh, no. They’re reading glasses,” Tubbo says, then frowns, looking down at the hideous pair.

“Wait, these aren’t reading glasses.” He proceeds to put it back on its display stand. He wanders over to another display of sunglasses.

“It’s over here,” Clay says, glancing over at a sign which reads the exact words.

“Huh?” Tubbo looks over, squinting. “Oh.”

Well, there certainly are many pairs of spectacles here, of every shape and size, every hue and tint. Clay picks one up – its frame a sky blue, the lenses huge. Imagining it on Nick’s face elicits a good chuckle from him.

“What about this?”

Tubbo picks out a bright yellow pair, sprinkled with purple dots. It’s definitely loud. To be honest, it looks like something Skeppy would wear.

“Do they suit your dad, though?” Clay asks.

“Hmm.” Tubbo tries them on and stares at a mirror. “Um, probably not. My dad’s a pretty serious guy.”

Tubbo has, as Clay finds out, an eccentric taste in spectacles. After trying on several pairs that would go extremely well with other pieces of flamboyant clothing, he finally settles on a nice, forest-green one with rectangular lenses.

[“Thanks](#) for coming out with me today,” Tubbo says as they walk away from the store with the purchase. “I really appreciate it.”

“It’s no problem. You must be really close to your father.”

“Yeah,” Tubbo says. “He’s a little uptight, but he means well. It’s just...he’s gotten a little more... quiet ever since my brother died.”

“I see...” Clay mumbles. “How is he doing?”

“He’s much better now,” Tubbo says. “Went for grief counselling and everything, but sometimes you have to let the wounds heal with time, you know? You can’t exactly rush things.”

Clay knows that all too well. Mrs Armstrong had gone through something similar too.

“In the meantime, I’m gonna make my brother proud,” Tubbo says. “You remember that project I was working on? Well, I’m almost done with the improvements. When school restarts, can I ask for your help again?”

“Of course.”

Tubbo beams, thanking him. They reach the train station and Clay says goodbye to him as he boards the train. Well now, he’s got to make a few preparations at the Velvet Room and he’ll be set for tomorrow.

8/5 – WEDNESDAY – EVENING

<Phoenix SC> I recently found out just what happened to my daughter

<Phoenix SC> as it turns out her mother has a new boyfriend

<Phoenix SC> and they are making her highly uncomfortable

<Dream> In what sense?

For Phoenix SC to have been able to connect to his daughter to this extent...Clay is mighty proud of him.

<Phoenix SC> now they're trying to get full custody of my daughter

<Phoenix SC> by coercing her

<Dream> it sounds serious

<Phoenix SC> she won't tell me more

<Phoenix SC> she just said that they're doing something she doesn't like

<Phoenix SC> and if she tells me they'll do something worse

<Dream> could it be something illegal?

<Phoenix SC> I think so but I have no proof

<Phoenix SC> I think I will have to keep digging

<Phoenix SC> thanks for your concern though

"Is that..." Floris perks his snout up at the screen from where he's nestled between Clay's crossed legs. "I wonder what that girl's mother is up to."

"Whatever it is, it doesn't sound good," Clay says. He says a quick goodbye to Phoenix SC and switches his laptop off. "We'll just have to wait for more details on this one. Heck, I don't even know his real name."

Floris hums, moving once more to the end of the bed, where he has now claimed as his permanent spot. Clay plugs his laptop in to charge and back on the shelf. He settles into bed.

It's hard to sleep with all the worries weighing him down.

Chapter End Notes

Death arcana rank 4 -> 5 (tommy)

Hierophant arcana rank 9 -> 10 (philza)

Proficiency +3 (working at gun shop)

Faith arcana rank 2 -> 3 (tubbo)

Hermit arcana rank 5 -> 6 (phoenix sc)
proficiency +3 (crafting)

Pyramid of Wrath: Life Will Change

Chapter Summary

stealing gina's heart

Chapter Notes

WARNING: Body horror + suicidal thoughts

it's time to leave the pyramid of wrath behind

hello i seriously just wrote this bc i needed a break from school lol

8/6 – THURSDAY – DAYTIME

“Gina? Can you open the door?”

Clay and the other Thieves are gathered outside her room, squeezed in that long, narrow hallway. Zak holds the calling card in hand, the one that Gina had sent Clay, with Eret having penned the message.

George’s phone buzzes.

Sis: Now?

“Yes, now,” Clay says. “Please.”

No answer. Neither verbally nor by text. However, in the next couple of seconds, the knob turns, a clicking sound punctuating the silence. George pushes the door open, and Clay finally gets a view of Gina’s room, as well as Gina herself.

Clay cannot express just how much her face looks like George’s, almost like a female version of him. Despite the astounding similarities, the differences are relatively...less subtle. Gina is thin, face gaunt, her arms akin to sticks. Her legs, on the other hand...Clay gulps.

Gina does not speak. Instead, she wheels herself back to her desk and continues to type away on her laptop.

“Thank you, Gina.” George approaches her, a hand on her head and ruffling her hair, pressing a light kiss to her temple.

“You’d better be,” Gina huffs.

“We should be able to bypass the barrier now,” Floris says. “Zak, the card.”

“Oh, right.” Zak tears his eyes from Gina’s chair and strides up to her. She taps the corner of her

desk, and Zak leaves it there. “Be sure to read it, okay?”

Gina barely gives a grunt of acknowledgement. Clay whips out his phone and scrolls through his apps to find the widget with the jarring red and black. He activates the Meta-Nav and the world pulses around them, sinking into a black void that spits them once more into the scorching desert.

[Dream](#) can smell the Palace security level from here. When they approach the bronze doors, they are once again greeted by the multitude of sandstone stairs that bring them all the way up to the elevator that was once blocked off. Now, the green shield has been disabled, no longer scalding Dream when he lays a hand on its surface.

The Thieves pile into the elevator and it begins its ascent, shuttling them towards the upper levels of the pyramid.

Outside, Dream can hear the howl of something otherworldly. Whatever ancient monster that they have awakened, he hopes that they don’t ever need to encounter it. The elevator jerks to a halt, its metal doors sliding open and revealing several individual platforms floating amongst a sea of numbers blinking by so rapidly it makes Dream’s head spin.

“The Treasure chamber is just up ahead,” Navi says. “But there are enemies in the way.”

“What? Do we brawl?” Sappnap asks, stepping forward, cudgel in hand.

“No,” Dream says. It’s been a trend, it seems, to have to fight the Palace ruler before getting away with their Treasure. They’re not going to waste their energy on grunts. “We’re going to tear past them.”

At Dream’s command, the Thieves run, guns out. Dream shoots the first Shadow in the leg, crippling it and Bad takes it out with several shots to the face. The Shadow bursts into ash. Some Shadows they fight, some Shadows they leave alone, especially those with red auras blazing from their bodies.

At the final platform lies a black door, a strange symbol carved into it. Laying his fingers upon the engravings, the glyph glows. The door rumbles and slides open, revealing a darkened chamber with virtually no light source. A sarcophagus stands in its centre, arms crossed.

Dream stands before the sarcophagus. Could this be the Treasure? Or is the Treasure inside it? With Skeppy and Bad’s help, Dream manages to get the lid open, only to reveal an emptiness within.

“What the heck?” Sappnap peers into it.

“Language!”

“There’s nothing inside,” Fundy observes. “Did Gina’s Shadow pre-empt us?”

“Possibly,” Eret says. “That means that the Treasure could be anywhere, correct?”

Before anyone can answer that, a sudden earthquake shakes the pyramid. Dream nearly loses his balance. He drops his centre of gravity in an attempt to remain steady as the pyramid continues its unholy shaking. Is it just him or is that roar getting closer and closer...?

“Enemy readings above us!”

Immediately after Navi’s shout, the roof is smashed away, the sudden flash of sunlight beamed

through the hole in the ceiling blinds Dream. Wind curls around them, the draft almost blowing them off their feet. Another violent thump sends the rest of the roof scattering to the desert below, shattered into sandy debris.

When Dream's eyes have adjusted to the sudden light, he finds himself staring at Shadow Gina levitating above them, behind her the monster that Dream had seen his first time here. The crazed, airborne sphinx with immeasurable strength in its wings.

Are they going to have to fight that fucking thing? It's bigger than anything the Thieves have ever encountered, and that is saying *a lot*.

"Uh, Dream," Bad starts, voice muffled by his scarf. The beast roars and sends a sandstorm dancing through the room, slicing at them. Dream avoids the blades of green, sustaining only a small cut to the forearm.

"[Dear](#) brother," Shadow Gina descends, and it is only now that Clay notices that her feet have never touched the floor. She floats over to them, hands on her head, grasping at her hair. "Do you see? This is what mother has become. She has gone insane."

"I know that, and I can't forgive our father--"

"He's not our father!" Shadow Gina shrieks. "He's not our father after he abandoned us." She bends over, as if in physical pain. "I'm going to become like our mother, brother. I'm going to go down her path. I'm going to go crazy. That is why I must die!"

"What are you talking about, Gina?" Navi takes one step towards her. "Gina, this is--"

"Shut up! Shut up, shut up, shut up!" Shadow Gina screams. "It's because of us that our mother went crazy! If she never had us, she'd be fine! We're worthless, useless! If she never went crazy then..." A droplet drips from her cheek. "Garett would still be alive."

Navi bites his lip. "Gina...I...It's not your fault."

Shadow Gina laughs hysterically. Laughs and laughs, till the whole chamber is filled with her demented laugh. She's staring at the ground, her arms around her middle, calming down from her bout of cackles.

"No, you're right, dear brother," Shadow Gina says. "It's not *my* fault."

When she peers up at them, Dream recoils in disgust. Black ooze spills from her empty sockets, her mouth twisted up into a grin that splits her face in half, black liquid trickling from the corners.

"It's *our* fault."

[Shadow](#) Gina screams, a pillar of flames engulfing her and the beast bellows in agreement.

"Navi!" Dream summons Lachesis, casting a blanket of ice between Navi and Shadow Gina. That is no longer Shadow Gina. That is nothing but a husk that stores sorrow, rage, guilt...The flames melt the ice like a hot knife through butter, but it gives Dream enough time to pull Navi away from the blistering inferno.

"It's not...it's not our fault, Gina! It's neither of our faults, it's our f--"

"You just don't want to see the truth with your own two eyes," Shadow Gina accuses. "You want to blame everyone else for what happened."

The monster that emerges from the fire is nothing like Dream has ever seen. Nothing more grotesque, nothing more hideous has ever graced the earth before this...hybrid. The sphinx now grows two heads, one of Shadow Gina's nightmarish face and the other original head. Their body resembles that of a lion with an eagle's claws and a snake's tail, feathered wings beating harshly and taking to the skies.

"Brother!" Shadow Gina wails, spitting orbs of black onto the ground that spring into writhing Shadows. "We must die! We cannot live with what we have done!"

"Everyone!" Eret shouts, voice drowned out by the sheer volume of the beating wings. "Prepare for battle!"

The Shadows make their advance.

"Bad, Skeppy, deal with the Shadows! Eret, Sapnap, Fundy, you're with me!"

Seamlessly, the teams assemble accordingly. Sapnap is the first to strike, summoning Seiten Taisei and driving his cudgel into the ground. Electricity sparks all over the battlefield, zaps of lightning zipping towards the sphinx. The sphinx roars and counters with its own brand of wind sickles, the wind strong enough to send the bolts back at the team.

Dream summons Isis, erecting a blue dome around them.

"I can't sense any weaknesses," Navi says. Necronomicon flickers. "No strengths either...I think--"

The blue barrier shatters like glass as soon as the thunderstorm dissipates.

"I can't sense anything!" Navi cries. "I don't see-I!"

Dream switches to Zouchouten fast enough to deflect the fireball spewed from the snake's head at the end of the chimera's tail. The chimera takes to the skies, going way too far for them to hit with their melee weapons.

"Use your Personas and guns!" Eret shouts, Robin Hood firing an arrow of light at the chimera. The arrow sails through the air, but the distance is too great. It gives the surprisingly-deft chimera time to dodge the projectile with ease. The arrow of light fizzles away into nothingness.

Fundy summons Zorro, summoning a bout of wind in response to the chimera's barrage of fireballs. The wall of wind keeps the attack at bay while Dream summons Isis and fires his own sphere of light.

The chimera spirals into the air, wings carrying it so high that it becomes nothing but a speck of black against the dazzle of the sun's rays. Dream can hardly look at it without having to shield his eyes and squint. What's it doing?

The first blow hits without any warning. Dream is knocked clean off his feet when a giant shape slams against the pyramid, a giant wing sweeping across the field. Dream crashes into the wall headfirst, inciting an insistent ringing within his ears. He opens his eyes, bright yellow and beige blending together.

"Dream!"

Dream wills his vision to clear, only able to register a steel-grey entity in front of him, glowing with green mysterious symbols. It's only when someone sends wisps of healing magic through him that he truly comes to his senses, all manner of concussion leaving him.

“Dream! Are you alright?” the one who had protected him is Navi, Necronomicon buzzing and flickering. Why is it...? Necronomicon blinks away entirely and Navi drops to the ground. Dream leaps at him, throwing both of them to the ground just in time to avoid the stabbing claws of a mummified Shadow. He puts a bullet through the back of its head, the mummy bursting into ash and covering them with black goo.

“Thanks,” Navi says. His clothes are distorted too, as if swapping between George and Navi. “Sorry for that, I...”

“It’s fine,” Dream says, helping him up. “Can you summon Necronomicon?”

Navi closes his eyes. His outfit stabilizes again, the “404” on the front of his shirt gleaming. He scrunches his face up, concentrated energy coursing through his veins, literally, from the way his body lights up with the illuminating green. Necronomicon rises above him again, but it’s not as... pronounced as before. More whitewashed.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I really-“

Another blast of wind overhead drowns out Navi’s voice. Both duck, Dream’s hands on Navi’s shoulder. When heavy breathing gets too close for comfort, however, Dream immediately glances up, met with Shadow Gina’s ghoulish face, bleeding black from her eyes and grinning mouth.

“Dear brother...it’s so cold,” Shadow Gina says. “I don’t remember the last time I was warm...”

“Gina, it’s not our fault! It’s all our father’s fault! Please!” Navi shouts, voice wavering. “We don’t have to fight!”

“Oh, don’t give me that,” Shadow Gina snarls. “Stop averting your eyes from the truth! We drove our mother insane! *We* killed Garrett!”

Navi winces. “We didn’t...” His clothes flicker again and Necronomicon blinks out of existence.

“Don’t listen to her,” Dream tightens his grip on Navi’s shoulder. “Focus!”

Shadow Gina sucks in a lungful of air and it gives Dream all the indication he needs. He summons Lachesis and forms an ice wall around them, shielding the both of them from Shadow Gina’s chilly breath. Dream shatters the reinforced ice wall with Zouchouten’s trident, bits of ice raining down on them.

“Are you okay? Dream, Navi?” Bad comes running over, cooking a Shadow while he’s at it and dressing their wounds with a shot of Diarama each.

“We’re fine,” Dream says. “Where is the-“ The wind has gone, alongside the beast.

“In the sky,” Bad says, shaking his head. “We can’t see it. If it comes down on us like that again...” He gulps. “I’m not sure how long it’ll take before...”

If they can just *know* when the beast is coming down, then that would give them time to prepare. It would give them time to take shelter from the beast’s attacks, or at least summon their Personas to defend themselves...

“Dream,” Navi says, suddenly, straightening his shoulders, an uncanny smile on his face. “We can...let’s not fight anymore.”

“What do you mean? Navi?” Dream shakes him. “What are you talking about?”

“If we die, Gina’s pain and suffering will end, won’t it?” Dream cannot see Navi’s face behind those goggles, but he can’t imagine that he’s looking too good. “She’s right! She’s goddamn right! Garrett died because we couldn’t save him! Our mother went crazy because we weren’t good enough!”

“Navi, why?” Bad steps in, a worried frown on his face.

“If we can just die...no, if *I* just die...” Navi’s outfit changes completely, shifting from his blue and brown combination to a grey turtleneck and jeans, which was what he was wearing before they entered the Palace. His mask disappears from around his face. “You just need to sacrifice me, Dream. If *I* die, then-“

“No!” Dream roars. “No one’s dying here! We’re going to subdue Gina’s Shadow and send her back to her body and she’s going to have a change of heart, dammit!”

George jolts.

“Do you really believe that Gina will think that?” Dream all but screams in George’s face because in that one moment, in that one *second*, Dream experiences fear like he’s never had, no matter how close he’s come to dying. *Losing* George is on another level altogether. “That is only Gina’s Shadow. She’s more than that. Remember how she didn’t want to involve you in all this? How she was so worried about you?”

George nods dumbly.

“She cares for you! She loves you, George! She loves you!”

“I...”

Dream almost breathes a sigh of relief when he sees that fire in George’s eyes again, burning away the ice that had momentarily taken root in his heart and soul. In an instant, George becomes Navi once more. He leaps into Necronomicon and floats high above them.

Necronomicon whirrs like a CPU on overdrive, its dome spinning wildly, green beams of light randomly bursting from it.

“I can sense it!” Navi shouts. “We’ve got time! Heal up and prepare for its landing!”

Dream can barely hide his smile. Seeing Navi in action is always so...no, wait. Concentrate on the fight!

Skeppy stabs a weaker Shadow through its mask, killing it. “Do we have time to launch an attack?”

“I...I think so,” Navi says. “Skeppy and Eret. If you can craft a gigantic spear in five seconds max, I can tell you where it’s going to land and we can stab it through.”

“I can do that,” Eret says. Skeppy chimes in with his agreement.

Right now, the sphinx is naught but a fleck in the sky, circling the pyramid. From this distance, it’s hard to tell the angle it’s going to strike from...

“Eret and Skeppy, you work with Navi,” Dream says. “Fundy and Bad heal everyone who needs healing. Sapnap, we’ll take care of the lesser Shadows.”

“Already on it.” Sapnap smashes its cudgel over a Shadow’s head, breaking its mask and sending

black goop splattering to the ground. Dream takes care of a couple more Shadows, lancing them through with Zouchouten's trident and blasting them away with Anzu's twin cyclones.

He's so caught up in the battle that he barely even heard Navi's shout of "It's coming!"

A green beam catches his eye, fired from Necronomicon's core at the ground. Skeppy stabs the sandstone, ice spreading from his katana to the highlighted spot, whatever water in the air cracking and freezing. Eret quickly follows up with a protective covering of light, spiralling up into the air.

The chimera notices it too late. Its velocity is too fast to stop, not even with the sheer might of its wings straining against the effort. The blessed icicle pierces the chimera's chest and the two heads scream, voices screechy and ear-splitting. It thrusts its paws out, making a swipe at them. Fundy leaps out of the way in time, hopping onto Dream's shoulder.

The more the chimera struggles, the larger a hole the spear tears through its chest, bubbling and oozing its black blood. The moment the chimera stops tossing and turning is when it is engulfed by a cloud of subdued, crackling fire, returning the monstrosity to her human form.

[Shadow](#) Gina lies on the ground, panting and heaving. Her face has turned back to normal, a little semblance of light returning to those brown irises. Navi dismisses Necronomicon and gathers her up in his arms. She seems so...so small and forlorn in Navi's grasp, so beaten and battered.

"Gina, are you okay?"

"You...stupid...piece of shit." Shadow Gina coughs. "I'm not even the real Gina."

"You're real," Navi insists, shaking his head. "This...this only happened because I ignored you. I ignored your pain and..."

"Hah." Shadow Gina laughs. "You've always been such a worrywart." She angles her head, catching sight of Dream.

"I'm gonna go back now. Take care of my brother." Shadow Gina laughs, and she begins to dissolve into butterflies, fading away in Navi's arms.

"There we go," Dream says as Navi stands. "Hopefully, she'll experience a change of heart soon."

"But where's the Treasure?" Fundy asks, peering around. The sarcophagus has been utterly destroyed in the battle, leaving almost no trace of it behind. There is nothing in this room that could be considered a Treasure...

"Could it be that Gina was the Treasure herself?" Bad asks. "I mean, she *was* supposed to be the one in the sarcophagus..."

[Behind them](#), Dream hears something crumble and break, something groan and creak. He spins on his heels, coat whipping at his legs when he realizes that the pyramid is collapsing behind them.

"Oh my goodness," Bad mumbles. "We do this every time..."

"Run!" Skeppy shouts, and the Thieves scramble over the walls of the pyramid, sprinting down the pyramid exterior as fast as their legs can possibly take them.

"We're not gonna make it!" Navi yells, already out of breath.

"Fundy! Can't you do something useful for once?" Sappnap cries. He grabs Fundy by his fur and

hurtles his tiny body into the air.

Fundy screams, doing three flips consecutively. His body changes midway through the air, from a miniature fox to an orange minivan, landing harshly on the ground.

“Oh shit!” Dream yelps as the destruction catches up with them.

“Language!”

The force of the explosion flings them off their feet right into Fundy’s cushiony...exterior? Fundy’s body morphs and Eret scrambles to the wheel. Dream crawls to the passenger seat as Eret slams his foot on the accelerator.

The Fundybus jerks forward, tyres complaining against the sandy ground. Dream curses when Eret makes a sharp turn, narrowly avoiding a chunk of sandstone that smashed into the ground beside them.

“What the muffin,” Skeppy mutters, rubbing at his head, adjusting his mask.

“Someone! Meta-Nav, please!” Eret grits his teeth as he swerves the Fundybus once more, a piece of rubble collides with the ground, spraying up sand and dirt like a fountain.

“Hey, hey! Easy on the wheel!” Fundy huffs.

Before Dream can even lay fingers on his phone, the world changes around them, tossing them into a black void that takes them back to the real world.

Invisible Wounds

Chapter Summary

s links

Chapter Notes

im gonna run out of chapter titles soon

MCC WAS LIT i watched violet vampires but omg fuchsia frankensteins won :))))
they did so GOOD

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

8/6 – THURSDAY – EVENING

“Ow.”

“Get off me!”

Fundy crawls out from under Clay, shaking his body of sand. Clay finds himself trapped under a pile of other bodies. Standing over them are George and Eret, the latter with his arms folded.

“Well,” Eret says, clearing his throat. “We got out of there safe.”

“Safe is...” Nick hurls Zak off him. Zak tumbles onto the asphalt, landing perfectly on his butt between two cars. “Safe is not a word I’d use to describe this.”

“We could have been squashed by...by debris,” Darryl says, patting at his front. “Good thing I didn’t tear my sweater. I just got this.”

The rest of the Thieves haul themselves to their feet. Clay moves to adjust his mask, only to find it missing. Ah, that’s right. They’ve left the Metaverse. For some reason, it feels so...alien for it to not be there.

“I think we should get some well-earned rest,” Clay says, turning to the team. “Good job, everyone.”

George sends them off to the train station, promising that he will let them know when Gina’s heart has been changed.

“Man, I hope she comes through for us,” Nick says, hands behind his head. “I have absolutely no other idea how we’re going to deal with Medjed.”

“Oh my God,” Zak drags a hand across his face. “I completely forgot about that.”

“They’re the whole reason we’re trying to steal Gina’s heart, you know,” Clay says, kicking a

pebble.

“And how can you forget when people are literally talking about it everywhere?” Darryl asks.
“And they’re on the news too.”

“I don’t watch the news!”

“It’s all over Instagram and Twitter too,” Eret says. “Virtually every piece of social media you come across.”

“Stop attacking me!” Zak whines.

They wave each other a tired goodbye at the train station. Clay heads back with Nick, Floris tucked safely in his bag. He must be exhausted, as indicated by his light snores.

Nick ends up falling asleep on the train, head thrown back, mouth open, much to the disgust of the elderly man sitting opposite them. Clay wonders if there’s a bug or something he can shove into...

Clay shuts his eyes, but all he can see behind those lids is the screaming, nightmarish face of Shadow Gina and all he can hear are those saddened, helpless screams.

*

8/7 – FRIDAY – DAYTIME

“Clay? Fancy seeing you here.”

Clay looks up from his phone to find Dr Montgomery in exercise attire, a luminous yellow running jacket paired with black track pants.

“Ah, Doctor.”

“Are you here for the clean air as well, Clay?” Dr Montgomery is a little out of breath, rivulets of sweat trickling down the sides of her face.

“I’m meeting someone,” Clay says. Helen Park’s a good place to jog, but with all that’s happening, he’s never quite found the time...

“I see,” Dr Montgomery says. “Mind if we have a little chat? I’ve suddenly thought of a new idea regarding my research.”

“Sure.”

Clay walks with Dr Montgomery past thickets and trees. Birds perch on fences, chirping beautiful melodies. Youngsters zoom them by on bicycles. Their walk takes them down a gravel path which is, thankfully, under the shade of overhanging canopies.

“You know, I recently got scratched by a cat,” Dr Montgomery says, laughing. “I was trying to help it get down from a tree, but it didn’t seem to want my help.”

“That’s unfortunate.”

“Isn’t it?” Dr Montgomery says. “The wound’s just closing – it was a few days ago after all.” She lets silence hang between them for a while. “Well, I’m sure you didn’t agree to go on a walk to hear me talk about cats.”

“It’s fine. I think cats are cool.”

“Are they?” Dr Montgomery glances over, inquisitive eyes piercing even through the thick lenses of her spectacles. “Well, let’s talk about another kind of pain. With physical injuries, it’s easy to diagnose and address it. That is, compared with the pains of the heart.”

“Yeah. I should think so.”

“Indeed. When we’re talking about trauma, for example, we find it difficult to accurately pinpoint the exact cause and come up with a suitable treatment right off the bat...so it got me thinking,” Dr Montgomery says. She stops in the middle of the quiet path and turns to face Clay full on.

“Do you think that there could possibly be a direct way to reduce emotional pains? Such as putting antiseptic on a wound?” Dr Montgomery asks.

“Is that what you’re researching?”

Dr Montgomery hums, nodding enthusiastically. “There is no such treatment as of yet, to immediately reduce someone’s emotional pain...” She looks thoughtful for a second, then stares out at the bushes, at the chickadees standing on a branch, tails quirked. “Psychological issues are much more complex, however. Our own pain is the only type of pain that we can fully understand...”

“That’s pretty obvious.”

“It seems simple, but it’s actually key to my research.” Clay and Dr Montgomery resume their walk, back to the bench where Clay was waiting. “A person’s ‘heart’ cannot be seen, and no matter how much they try to express it to someone else, it is impossible for the other party to truly grasp the exact nuances of their pain.”

They pass by a couple of tourists with cameras around their necks and sunhats on their heads. “If only there is a way to remove the root causes of that emotional pain...” Dr Montgomery touches her chin. “If I’m going to do any good in that area, I’m going to have to do a little more research. In other words, I have to learn how the ‘heart’ responds to stimuli.

“Once I’ve got that figured out, not only can we fully understand a person’s pain, we can definitely open up a realm of possibilities of treatment of wounded hearts.”

They’ve reached the area where Clay had been seated, the bench now being taken up by an old man feeding the flock of pigeons by his feet.

“That’s a grand plan,” Clay says.

“It’s nothing too grandiose,” Dr Montgomery says with a smile. “If we can just get rid of people’s pain, wouldn’t that make the world a better place? I’m not a big fan of pain.”

“How are you thinking of doing that, though?” Clay asks, hands tucked into his pockets. “It sounds terribly hard.” Don’t even *think* about how close it hit to home. Seeing someone’s “heart”? Remove the root causes of their pain? Clay knows the concept all too well.

“I haven’t got a concrete idea yet,” Dr Montgomery says, pushing her spectacles higher up the bridge of her nose. “I’m determined, though. Most people would just laugh this off, claim that it’s not possible, but I’m not giving up.” There is a sparkle in her eye, a sparkle that Clay has seen many times over. In Nick, in Darryl, in Zak, in Eret and even George.

“Still, you actually do take the time to listen to the ramblings of an eccentric woman,” Dr Montgomery says with a giggle. “Thanks to you, I think I’m actually getting somewhere with my theories. Just...a smidge, you know. It’s starting to appear in front of me.” She waves a hand in front of her face to demonstrate her point.

Clay’s phone chooses to ring at that time, and he glances down at the caller ID. Oh, it looks like he has to go now.

“Is that your friend?” Dr Montgomery asks. “Well, I guess you’d better get going. Thank you so much for our little chat today, Clay.”

“It’s no problem.” Clay bids her farewell and he walks over to the path leading towards the station, only to find a girl in a white button-down and black skirt running up to him, her lanyard dangling from her neck.

“Sorry about that,” Ruby says, trying her hardest to catch her breath. “My boss wouldn’t let me go and...”

“Whoa, breathe.” It’s good to see that she’s still doing well. Much better, at least, than at her last job. Her cheeks are rounder, her eyes filled with life, a stark contrast to how she was like when he first met her. When she was still troubled greatly by the deep pains of her heart.

Ruby lets out a breathless laugh. “So, shall we go?”

*

8/7 – FRIDAY – EVENING

“What are these, inmate?”

Justine points to a painting on the wall. To be honest, Clay has no idea. Perhaps he should have called Zak along. Fine arts are more his thing after all. The twins have demanded to visit an “art gallery” that they’ve heard about from Igor, which led to Clay dragging his ass out to the gallery on Lancer Lane, where Marion had held her exhibit.

“Paintings, portraits,” Clay says, shrugging. “Art.”

“This looks different,” Caroline calls from the other hallway. Seriously, it’s like looking after two little sisters. He follows after the twins who seem to be crowding around a sculpture of the Thinker.

“I heard from our Master that art is supposed to express the human soul,” Caroline says. She stabs her baton at the sculpture. “What is this supposed to express, inmate?”

“Uh...” Clay squints at the plaque affixed to the wall beside it. “A figure in contemplation...” Yeah, not very helpful there. The original artist is Auguste Rodin. The statue represents the creative mind at work. This particular sculpture is, very obviously, not the real thing.

“I wonder what he is thinking about,” Caroline says, marvelling at it.

“Perhaps something profound. Or something diabolical,” Justine says. “Could he, perhaps, have a Palace as well?”

“If he does, I wanna see what it’s like inside,” Caroline says.

Thank goodness the gallery is nearly empty at this time of the day, just half an hour before it is set to close. Hearing two otherworldly beings disguised as young girls talk about Palaces and whatnot would be plain weird to the unenlightened ear.

As expected from, ahem, *children*, Justine and Caroline get bored rather quickly, flitting from one painting to the next sculpture like butterflies, spending less than a few seconds at each. Clay perks up at the sound of the announcement blaring through the loudspeakers. The gallery is going to close in ten minutes and would like all guests to leave as soon as possible.

“Well, it was interesting at first,” Caroline says once they are outside, arms folded. “Then it got boring because they all looked the same.”

“However, we have managed to attain a general understanding of the hearts of average humans,” Justine says with a smile. “Could you not sense the emotions pouring forth from the artwork?”

Caroline huffs. “No.”

“Well then, perhaps you may need to hone your heart a little more, Caroline,” Justine says. She glances down at her clipboard. “Inmate, this is the...fourth assignment you have completed for us.”

“Yeah! There are still a lot more, inmate! Don’t get cocky,” Caroline says, hands migrating to her hips.

“There are only six more,” Justine says. “Visiting these locations will surely aid in your rehabilitation.”

“So you’re giving me assignments off that list of yours?”

“Indeed, but it is not I who penned this list,” Justine says. She frowns. “Interestingly enough, I do not quite remember who did...” She turns to Caroline. “Was it you, Caroline?”

“Huh?” Caroline shakes her head furiously. “Of course not! I’ve never even seen that list in my life!”

“Then who wrote it...?” Justine mumbles. She shakes her head. “It’s no matter. Come, Trickster. We must depart for the Velvet Room.”

Clay shrugs. Whatever mystery they’ve got going on, it’s not really any of his business...He escorts the twins back to the stunningly-blue door and heads back to Jule Halls.

*

8/8 – SATURDAY – DAYTIME

“You should run away.”

“I...I can’t.”

Clay pauses and glances down the narrow alleyway that leads to Untouchable. He recognizes the second voice.

Niki?

“Your mother doesn’t want us to be together,” the boyish voice says, insistent. “She doesn’t want what’s best for you. We can run away together. Just the two of us.”

“But I...I can’t leave my mother alone like that.”

Clay leans against the wall, phone pulled out, mindlessly scrolling through his new messages.

“Why not? She obviously doesn’t care for you. Look at this!”

Niki gasps. Clay locks his phone and pushes himself off the wall.

“Stop it!” Niki growls. Clay has never heard her get so angry before. “Might I remind you that some of these are from you as well?”

“It’s for your own good, Niki. Otherwise, you’d be looking at other guys now.”

“What kind of person do you think I am? I’m done with you!” Niki hollers. “It’s over between us!”

[“Niki!](#) You bitch! Come back!”

That is the last straw. At the sound of quickened footsteps, Clay steps out to reveal himself at the entrance to the alleyway. Niki nearly runs into him, looking up in mild terror before she realizes who he is.

“Clay? Did you-“ Niki starts, voice wavering. With frustration or fear, Clay isn’t sure.

Clay glares at the boy pursuing her, his face a mask of anger. Teeth gritted, fists clenched, eyes bulging. He moves to stand between Niki and the boy, adrenaline coursing through his veins.

“Oh, so you’re not just a bitch. You’re a whore too.” The boy fumes.

“What? I have never...” Niki trails off.

“I’m just her friend,” Clay says. “Nothing more.”

“Yeah, that’s what they all say,” the boy snarls. “Get away from my bitch or I’ll fucking kill you.”

“Say that again,” Clay says. His body hums, almost as if with magic. “Say that again and you’ll regret it.”

A hint of fear flashes across the boy’s face. He spits at the ground and harrumphs, turning back down the alleyway and stalking away. A whimper catches Clay’s attention and he turns back to Niki, who appears so very shaken up.

[“Hey,](#) you okay?” Clay’s voice softens. Niki’s fingers curl loosely around her wrist rubbing at her sleeve. She isn’t looking at him, her gaze focused on the ground.

“I’m fine,” Niki says. “I...I’ve tried so hard to...I can’t be with him anymore. He’s become a monster, Clay.”

Clay presses his lips together. This problem cannot wait any longer; it’s been simmering for too long, the pressure and heat finally bursting free of their confines.

“What’s his name?” Clay asks. “Full name.”

“Huh?” Niki appears surprised. “It’s...Derek Grey. Why do you want to know?”

“No reason,” Clay says, wondering if that just made him sound even more suspicious. Niki is a smart girl, but there’s absolutely no way that she will ever find out about his activities.

“Oh...um...” She forces a laugh. “This is kind of awkward.”

“To make it *not* awkward,” Clay says, jabbing his thumb at the crepe stand. “You want some crepes?”

The sparkle in Niki’s eyes is all the answer he really needs.

*

Chapter End Notes

Councillor arcana rank 2 -> 3 (Montgomery)

Aeon arcana rank 3 -> 4 (justine & caroline)

Tragedy

Chapter Summary

more s links + planning for mementos trip

Chapter Notes

WARNING: implied gore

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

8/8 – SATURDAY – EVENING

“How’s work?” Clay asks.

The end of Blade’s stick strikes the white ball, ricocheting off the walls of the table, knocking the pink, orange and green balls into the holes, clattering as they go.

“Excellent. Except I’m getting death threats every day,” Blade says. Clay assumes a comfortable stance, one eye closed.

“From your colleagues?”

The white ball bounces across the table once more, scoring Clay a yellow ball. There is just the red one left, and if he takes Blade’s skill into account...

“Mostly social media,” Blade says, and pauses. “Actually, it’s all on social media, though neither my department nor my partner like me anyway.”

His partner on the Phantom Thieves case...he must be referring to Mrs Armstrong.

“How come?”

“You talking about the death threats or the not-liking-me part?”

“The not-liking-you part.”

Blade wins the round with way more points than Clay cares to admit. They start a new game almost immediately, almost as if it’s second nature.

“They think I’m a child,” Blade says, distaste in his tone. “They think it’s hilarious – an eighteen-year-old working alongside the adults. Well, they’d probably hate me less if I didn’t go on shows.”

“Oh, I saw your interview the other day,” Clay says. “The one about James Kris.”

“People are talking about Medjed now,” Blade says. “I thought you’d know, seeing as you’re some kind of Phanboy.”

“I’m not a fanboy.”

“I don’t know,” Blade says. With one powerful thrust, the stick breaks the triangle, scattering billiard balls all across the table. “You’re acting like one with your blind faith in the Phantom Thieves.”

“Is it really blind faith, though? They’re obviously doing good,” Clay says.

“Well.” Blade sighs. “You do you. My hunch tells me that the Phantom Thieves aren’t going to last very long.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Has your investigation gotten anywhere?”

“Eager, aren’t we?” Dammit. Clay hates how Blade can just read him like a book, like the layers of masks that Clay wears isn’t enough to deter him. “It’s just instinct. We don’t actually have anything concrete. But...”

Clay manages to get two red balls into the holes, racking up a grand total of two points.

“But what?”

“But we’re beginning investigation into the place where it originated. Enderlands High,” Blade says.

Clay nods, keeping his expression neutral. “I see. You think you can find some clues there?”

“Somewhat,” Blade says. “It was my idea, though. My partner was rather against it, because her son goes there or something.”

Yeah. He does.

“That’s all there is to it,” Blade says. “You can continue supporting your favourite Phantom Thieves. That is, until they get arrested.”

Clay hums and steels his resolve. They’re not going to get arrested. As their leader, he will never let anything happen to the Thieves.

That day, Clay wins exactly one game by exactly one point.

*

[8/9 – SUNDAY – DAYTIME](#)

“That’s how you do a Bullet Hail,” Tommy says, slotting the gun controller back into its holster. “You can take out a lot of enemies at once if you just aim right.”

“Aim right. Got it.”

“I hate to break it to you, but it’s harder than it looks, Dre,” Tommy huffs. He jumps when his phone begins to ring again. “Jesus.”

“Aren’t you gonna do something about your phone?” It’s been ringing nonstop ever since they started their friendly competition today. Honestly, it’s leaving Clay rather curious.

“No,” Tommy says. “It’s probably Manifold again. Seriously, though, I don’t get why they keep wanting me back like this.”

“Maybe because they don’t want you leaking mafia secrets.”

“Listen, Dre. If that was the case, I’d be dead now. Punz isn’t kind.”

The incessant ringing stops for a few moments, then starts up again. Tommy lets out a noise of frustration and finally, *finally* picks it up, glaring at the screen. He furrows his brows, and answers it.

[“You’re](#) not Pokimane.”

Clay can’t hear the other person speaking, but Tommy throws his bag over his shoulder and strides out of the arcade, phone clutched tightly in his hand, his tone becoming more and more agitated.

“What have you done with Pokimane? Tell me, you bastard!”

Already, Tommy is drawing attention from the few people on the streets.

“Tommy...”

“You’re fucking lying!”

“Tommy!” Clay grasps his shoulder, but Tommy shrugs him off roughly. He heads down a small side street, crouching by the side, phone still in hand. Clay follows him. Tommy has never seemed so small, so vulnerable, before. He stares at the asphalt, one arm curled around his knees, the other gripping the phone so tightly that it looks like it may shatter at any moment.

“Take that back! You-!” Tommy starts, only to rip the phone from his ear. His thumbs work the app quickly, accessing a multitude of video files. He finds the one he’s looking for and taps on it.

Clay stands at the side. This is something private, something that he has no right to see. However, all he can hear is screaming. Screaming and more screaming. Clay flinches at the final, terrified shriek before the sound is cut off.

Tommy is staring at the screen, eyes wide with shock. The phone slips from his hand, crashing to the ground. Clay’s stomach twists when he catches sight of the still picture on-screen, and he chokes down the bile rising in his throat. Forget the copious amounts of blood splattered on the screen. This sort of inhumanity... He locks the phone and hands it back to Tommy, who has yet to move from his position.

“Come on, Tommy. Let’s go somewhere safe.” Phil would know what to do. His shop’s just around the corner.

“Safe? What the fuck is ‘safe’?” Tommy lowers his head, tucking it between his knees. “There’s nowhere safe here. It’s happening again! It’s always like this!”

Happening again?

“Let’s get you to Phil, Tommy. Come on.”

“No!” Tommy’s head snaps up, a certain fire in those eyes shining with unshed tears. It’s not passion, it’s not anger. What Clay sees behind those furious, brown eyes of his is nothing more than pure desperation. The desperation to run away, to leave everything behind. “Leave me alone! Get the fuck away from me!”

“Tommy...”

“Are you deaf, Dre?” The wobble in his voice is obvious. “Go away!”

The last phrase was significantly weaker, a testament to the effort Tommy is putting in to hold himself together. To keep his heart from breaking to pieces. There’s no way Clay can leave him alone like this, but with Tommy continuously rejecting him...

Clay steps out of the side street and retrieves his phone from his pocket. He dials a number.

“Clay? What’s wrong?”

“It’s Tommy,” Clay says. “He’s across the street from the shop. I think you might want to come get him.”

“What happened? I’m on my way.”

“It’s...nothing good,” Clay mumbles. He catches sight of a black coat and a familiar green-and-white striped hat out of the corner of his eye. He utters a thanks to Clay, and for him to head on home, before making a beeline for Tommy still curled up against the wall.

There’s nothing else Clay can do besides do as he’s told for now. There is no way he can ask Tommy for a full name now, not in that distraught state. With his eyes on the ground, phone in his hand, he makes his way back towards the train station.

*

8/9 – SUNDAY – EVENING

“This here,” Wilbur says, handing his phone to Clay, “is my final draft of The War of L’manburg. I’ve just wrapped up the last few scenes...made the conclusion just slightly more satisfying.” He pauses. “I think it’s better if you just read it for yourself.”

What Clay holds in his hand right now is Wilbur’s final manuscript, culmination of his perseverance and evidence of his integrity. Given the lack of time, Clay chooses to read only the ending, the aftermath of the Festival of Manburg.

He eats each sentence, each paragraph, each scene up like a thousand-course meal, unable to take his eyes off the screen. The conflict within each warring party, the riveting conclusion filled with betrayal and hardship, the emergence of three separate factions fighting tooth and nail for the holy land of Manburg. When he reaches the end, watching the sun set on the outcrop overlooking the promised land, a sense of resolution washes over him.

“How was it?”

“Amazing,” Clay says. “I think it’ll do very well.”

“Really? I hope you’re not saying that just because.”

“No, I’m not.” Clay hands Wilbur back the phone. “I really do think this will be your next bestseller. You know, just like your first book.”

Wilbur hums, obviously pleased. “It’s still too early to judge. It’s been a few years since the incident. Not sure if people will give me a second chance.”

“Have faith,” Clay says. “I’m sure it’ll work out.”

“I’ll let you know when it’s scheduled for publishing,” Wilbur says. “For now, it still has to go

through a lot of edits. See what Alex and Ponk say.”

“I’m rooting for you. Can’t wait to read it.”

Wilbur smiles. “Thank you for your support. Till next time, Clay.” He packs his bag and heads out, bidding Clay a warm farewell with a small wave of his hand. Clay returns the gesture, and heads back up to his room.

*

8/9 – SUNDAY – EVENING

“So...two targets this time round,” Floris says. “One is our, ahem, image manager, Cheng.”

“And the other is Niki’s abusive boyfriend Derek Grey,” Clay says. “Cheng is kind of afraid we’re going to change her heart, so her Shadow should have appeared in Mementos by now. She’s put out a post on the forum warning Grey as well.”

“Two targets,” Darryl says. “Is that all?”

“Yeah,” Clay says. “We’ll prepare tomorrow and we’ll go in on Tuesday. How does that sound?”

“I think it’s fine,” Eret says. “Still, the situation regarding Niki sounds serious. We should deal with the Shadow as soon as possible.”

“If there are no objections, we’ll wrap up the meeting today.”

Clay exits the call and switches his laptop off, dropping onto his bed like a sack of potatoes. He’s dead tired from all the running about he’s been doing. Tomorrow he should head to Untouchable to buy or customize some new guns, and inquire about Tommy as well. Swing by Joel’s clinic to grab some medicine.

He can think about those things tomorrow. Today, he should probably just take it easy.

*

8/10 – MONDAY – DAYTIME

“Why are we here?”

“Because we’re to become one with nature.”

Clay furrows his brows, giving Zak a pointed look. Zak seems to pay him no mind, as he continues to hike up the steep gravel path. Why Zak has invited him all the way out here, to the outskirts of Chinatown, to...to soak in Mother Nature’s blessings, is a mystery to him.

“There’s a ton of bugs,” Floris says, tail whipping about. Clay waves his hand, attempting but failing to shoo the insects away. “Besides, aren’t we supposed to be preparing for the infiltration tomorrow?”

“Oh shush. It won’t take long,” Zak says. There are many tourists here, some gathered in groups around a tour guide, some walking alone, but most speaking languages that Clay cannot decipher. The higher they go, the hotter the sun beats down upon them. Soon, Clay’s shirt is drenched in sweat.

“How much longer?”

“A couple more minutes? Seriously, you’re all out of shape,” Zak says between wheezes.

“Shut up. You’re as unfit as I am.”

Man, does Clay miss the magic of the Metaverse.

When they finally reach the top, all Clay sees is what appears to be a quiet shrine constructed entirely out of wood, sporting a serene sepia and a calming ash colour. The shrine appears to be well-maintained, actually a precursor to the grand temple behind it.

[The temple](#) is quite something. Nothing like Clay’s ever seen before. Statues of fearsome lions – reminds him of the Shiisaa – stand guard outside the entrance. Incense wafts from within, where there is a huge viewing platform where one can observe the rites of the monks who pray to the Buddha.

“You decided to take me to a temple because...?”

“I got to thinking,” Zak says, “about desire you know. We’ve seen Marion and Kris, so we can draw inspiration from their desires. There’s greed, then there’s love, the desire to be with someone, right?”

“I never pegged you as a profound person,” Floris says, glancing around at the crowds of people.

Zak pouts. “What’s that supposed to mean?” He straightens his posture. “Anyway, that’s not all. I was thinking, what else is a facet of desire besides greed and love?” He snaps his fingers. “Faith.”

“Faith?”

“Yeah. Faith to a god. Or faith in anything, really,” Zak says. “Like, there’s this desire to receive God’s blessings, right, a desire to attain enlightenment from your god.”

“Uh huh.”

“I was thinking whether I can incorporate that into my work somehow,” Zak says. “As another aspect of desire.”

The bell tolls, a low sound that reverberates throughout the temple. Clay wonders what that is supposed to signify.

“Welp, let’s go,” Zak says. “The temple isn’t going to explore itself.”

Intrigued by this train of thought, Clay trudges after Zak, Floris by his heels. He’s got to admit, Zak’s ideas have piqued his curiosity a fair amount.

*

[8/10 – MONDAY – EVENING](#)

“I see,” Clay says, dipping his head.

“I would go and check in on him,” Phil says, fingers playing with the corner of his magazine.

“Unfortunately, Tommy doesn’t live with me, so I can’t just barge in his house. I’ll do what I can, Clay. No need to worry.”

Clay nods, keeping quiet.

“What brings you here today?” Phil asks.

“Oh, uh...gun customization,” Clay says. “And, um, I’d need a new sabre.” He holds up Floris’ chipped sabre.

Phil makes the necessary adjustments to their firearms and exchanges Clay’s sabre for the new one. With their new purchase, Clay heads back out into the warm summer air.

“Hey.”

Floris hops out from the bag, landing gracefully on the ground. He pads beside Clay, the duo walking towards the train station.

“Hmm?”

“Um...do you think...” Floris trails off.

“What is it?”

“It’s nothing,” Floris mumbles. “Let’s go home.”

His voice lacks life. There’s definitely something wrong. Maybe Clay should ask again later, in the quiet and isolation of their bedroom. On that note, he wonders how Ant is doing...

The train is, once again, filled with excited chatter and speculation. Who would win this war? The Phantom Thieves? Or Medjed? Clay sighs, plugging the buds into his ears, house music blasting through the earphones. If Gina’s heart doesn’t change in time...they’ve got to consider other alternatives...

Chapter End Notes

Priestess arcana rank 4 -> 5 (technoblade)

Death arcana rank 5 -> 6 (tommy)

Tower arcana rank 8 -> 9 (wilbur)

Knowledge +3 (tuition)

Star arcana rank 2 -> 3

Ending the Boyfriend's Abuse

Chapter Summary

change the targets' hearts!

Chapter Notes

yoooooooooooooooooooo

i hate continual assessment style like i have a 5-10% quiz every week but it feels like im having a final year exam. every week.

8/11 – TUESDAY – DAYTIME

“I see her. Cheng’s Shadow.”

Dream never thought he’d see the day where he has to change his friend’s heart. A friend, while he had never quite understood her obsession with the Phan-Site, he had come to trust. She never seemed this sinister before, as if all good has been banished from her being.

“Oh?” Shadow Yao Yi raises her brow. “Have the Phantom Thieves really come for me? To steal my heart?”

“Yeah,” Sappnap says, readying his cudgel. “You can give up now and return to your real body or you can stay and fight.”

“Violent much?” Shadow Yao Yi giggles. She shoots them a piercing glare. “I want to talk to your leader, alone.”

“You know we’re not going to agree-“ Navi starts, only for Dream to put up a hand.

“Just me, right?” Dream says. He gestures for the rest of the team to back off. The Thieves exchange glances, but do acquiesce upon Dream’s insistent wave.

“Yeah,” Shadow Yao Yi says. “I want them gone.”

Dream glances at his team. Bad seems to take the hint, and urge them to leave. One by one, the Thieves make their exit out of the void.

“Let’s make this quick,” Dream says. “You know why we’re here.”

“No, I don’t,” Shadow Yao Yi says seriously. Those golden flecks in her eyes aren’t as intense as the other Shadows they’ve fought. Perhaps she’s still not too far gone. “All I’ve been doing is helping you improve your reputation. Without me, you’ll never have gotten to where you are now!”

“That may be true,” Dream says. Yao Yi’s help has been invaluable, especially with her access to the Phan-Site, looking out for lesser targets and sending information their way. In a way, she is an irreplaceable member of their ragtag team. “But now, you only care about yourself. You’ve lost sight of your justice.”

“My justice lies with you!” Shadow Yao Yi cries. “Your justice is my justice! That’s why I’m–“

“No, it’s not,” Dream says firmly. “You only care about how you can use us to feel good about yourself.”

“That’s not true,” Shadow Yao Yi says. On instinct, Dream’s hand flies to the grip of his dagger. However, there isn’t the familiar swirling of fire, the black flames that would have engulfed her had she changed form. “I’m...I...” She worries her bottom lip between her teeth.

“Think about it. You’re just riding on our coattails,” Dream says, shaking his head.

“Then what should I do?” Shadow Yao Yi wails. She falls to her knees. “I’m not going to remain a zero forever! I’m gonna...what should I do?”

“That,” Dream says, turning his back on her, “is something you have to think about for yourself.”

[He emerges](#) from the void, only to find the Phantom Thieves missing. Funny. Shouldn’t they be waiting out here...?

The sound of chains triggers alarm bells in Dream’s head. Spinning on his heels, he comes face to face with a triad of skulls attached to the same skeletal body, chains flying behind it like whips.

[“Holy](#) fucking shit!” Dream wastes no time in running as fast as his legs can carry him, leaping over twisted train tracks and swerving down sharp bends. The other weaker Shadows melt into the walls, fearful chittering stabbing Dream’s ears.

Something explodes in the ground next to Dream, the force hurtling him into the air. He lands deftly on his feet, planting his heels into the ground. The veil of gravel and ash obscures his view, and Dream does not see the skull sailing towards him until it’s too late.

“Robin Hood!”

The skull explodes in mid-air, inches from Dream’s face. Dream yelps as he is once more thrown backwards, body crashing like a rag doll into the wall. Agony tears through him. It hurts to breathe. It hurts to move. God, it’s as if someone ripped his spine from his body...

“Dream!” Something cool, thin and tender curls around his waist and drags him back, significantly less tenderly, into the cushiony confines of the Fundybus. Navi dismisses Necronomicon just as Bad summons a cage of fire around the Wither.

“Step on it, Eret!”

“I know! I’m trying!” Eret does a three-point turn as fast as he can, wheels of the Fundybus screeching on the tracks.

The fire doesn’t hold the Wither for long. It roars, breaking free from its prison and launches another two skulls after them. The skulls explode around them, demolishing the walls, pieces of concrete raining down on them. The smaller Shadows plaster themselves to the walls as the Fundybus zooms down the tracks.

“Turn right in front and we should be at the platform!” Navi shouts.

As Bad’s healing magic begins to work, simmering beneath Dream’s skin and repairing his bones, Dream is able to move again. He jerks in the seat as the Fundybus runs over a twisted track. Sapnap hits his head on the ceiling with a howl of pain.

“Where the heck did that thing come from?” Dream cries. He peers out of the window. The Wither is fucking *gaining* on them!

Skeppy tries to answer, but screams when the Fundybus veers to the right, throwing them all against the doors. Dream is squashed between Sapnap and Skeppy, dealing a traumatic blow to his ribcage.

Eret throws open the door. “Okay! Get out, get out, get out!”

Fundy switches back to his fox form and is the first one down the escalator, followed by the rest of the Thieves. The Wither roars once more, but stalks them no further.

[The next](#) area is a rest stop, a seating area overlooking the train tracks.

“I have never been driven so fast in my *life*,” Fundy says, melting into a puddle against the seat.

“Tell me about it,” Skeppy rubs at his cheek, where a bruise is rapidly forming.

“That thing’s power levels are off the charts,” Navi says, shaking his head. “If we stayed and fought we would never have stood a chance.”

“Yeah,” Dream says. “I think it’s best to avoid it for now.”

“Oh, right. What did you and Cheng talk about? Did you guys fight?”

“Nope. I think she knew that deep down what she’s doing is wrong,” Dream says. “All I needed to do was to give her a little push.”

Navi pulls up the map of the previous area. He nods approvingly. “The void’s gone. That must mean the Shadow has returned to the real self.”

“Then that’s great,” Bad says. “Let’s go take care of the other one.”

“The other Shadow is about...it’s far from here,” Navi says. “Maybe it’s in the next path. The path of Kaitul.”

“Alright then,” Dream says, plopping into an empty seat. “Let’s take five first.”

*

[It’s](#) Grey’s Shadow.”

Oh man, the guy looks terribly evil, from the malicious leer on his face to the swathes of black flames dancing around his feet. Worse than his real self, and that’s saying a lot.

“The Phantom Thieves are after me,” Shadow Derek says, cackling. “This has got to be a fucking joke.”

“Stay away from Niki,” Dream declares. “This is your last warning.”

“You think you can just come in here and trample all over me?” Shadow Derek sneers. “The one whose heart needs changing is that bitch Niki!”

Unrestrained rage and loathing flows through Dream. He grits his teeth and clenches his jaw. How can this man before him act so...so despicably? Just how low does he want to sink?

“I can see the way she looks at other men! If I don’t keep her in check, she’s going to...she’s just going to play around with them and she’s going to throw me away like tra-!”

A shot rings out through the chamber. Black blood spurts from a wound to Shadow Derek’s shoulder. Shadow Derek staggers, back bending at an unnatural angle. As he reassumes his stance, his joints crack, snapping into place, almost like one giant centipede. Dream jams his pistol back into its holster and draws his dagger.

The flames around Shadow Derek rise like an inferno, scorching everything in its path.

[“Get ready!”](#) Navi summons Necronomicon in a fountain of green and hops into its body, hovering above the team.

The fire parts to reveal a handsome young fairy with elven features, clad in armour the colour of sage. He wields a spear, cape flowing behind him. Shadow Derek rushes them, spear thrust forth. Dream anticipates it, backflipping and summoning Isis, firing a bolt of light at Shadow Derek, who deflects it easily.

A green beam lands on Shadow Derek, homing in on his lithe figure.

“No Psi nor Frei skills,” Navi says. “Oh, and no Agi skills too!”

“Got it!” Dream hurls another bolt of light. Eret follows up with his own arrow, reinforcing Dream’s own projectile. Shadow Derek is pushed back several paces, still managing to minimize the damage with his spear.

A flash of orange and black scampers behind him, sabre charged with ribbons of chartreuse and white. He makes a quick stab and bypasses the cracks in his armour, catching Shadow Derek off guard. Shadow Derek lurches forth, bellowing in pain, bloody spittle splattering to the ground as he stabs wildly, the tip of his spear missing Fundy’s ear by mere inches.

“Sapnap! Skeppy, now!” Navi yells.

Two figures leap high into the air, cudgel and katana raised. Shadow Derek merely laughs, wiping the blood from his mouth. With one clean slice, Sapnap and Skeppy are hurled back, crashing into the ground, a wide slash across their middles.

“Fundy, Bad! Healing!” Dream switches from Isis to Zouchouten, leaving just barely enough time to parry Shadow Derek’s spear. He shoves Shadow Derek back and swaps out for Anzu.

“Dream, no!” Navi screams.

Shadow Derek moves fast, wielding his spear like a rifle. A sphere of light pierces through the air, slamming into Dream’s chest, forcing the air out of his lungs. Dream coughs, limbs drained of strength. He swaps Anzu out for Sandman, wheezing as he tries to catch his breath.

“What was that?” Eret reaches out a hand to Dream and hauls him to his feet.

“One-Shot Kill,” Navi says, voice tight. A rush of energy flows through Dream and the weakness

in his arms and legs vanishes. “Anzu was weak to Gun skills, but this Shadow specializes in them.”

“What are you waiting for?” Shadow Derek brandishes his spear. He’s taunting them in an attempt to get them to act recklessly. “Don’t tell me the famed Phantom Thieves are *this* weak!”

“No good,” Navi says. “His power levels are way higher than ours and it’s only getting stronger. We may have to retreat.”

But if they retreat, then Niki...

“No way,” Dream says. “We can’t.”

“Dream, we’re going to die!” Eret protests.

“We won’t! Navi, I have an idea-”

“Watch out!”

Fundy leaps at them out of nowhere, Zorro flickering to life and deflecting Shadow Derek’s spear with a blade of wind. Shadow Derek’s lips turn down in an ugly scowl. He barely dodges an icicle lance from behind him and dances around streaks of electricity and light.

Shadow Derek leaps back, putting some distance between them. Once more, he aims his spear like a cannon, a familiar sphere of light, its size unlike anything they’ve ever seen, gathering and swirling like a whirlpool. This is going to be a big one.

But it’s just what they need.

“Everyone! Stay back!” Dream rushes past them, drawing his dagger and summoning Isis.

“What?” Bad yells. “What do you mean?”

Eret grabs Bad’s shoulders, forcing him back. “Relax. He’s got a plan.”

“Are you joking? That’s fucking suicide!” Sapnap yells.

“Oh, you massive idiot.” Shadow Derek cackles and the beam of light is fired, the vortex of pure white blinding the Thieves. Dream throws up a veil of blue, squinting through the light. A wall of tentacles blocks the attack, each tentacle wielding a reflective shield tinted with a dark orange mixed with blue.

The beam of light ricochets off the barricade, pulverizing Shadow Derek’s armour. The sheer terror on Shadow Derek’s face is priceless as he is met with his own bullet. He flies so far and fast that all that’s left of him is a shroud of dust as he crashes into the wall at the far end of the chamber.

The light fizzles away like smouldering cinders.

Dream opens his eyes and takes in the full view of Necronomicon’s tentacles slithering back through the ground, back to its main body. Navi dismisses Necronomicon.

“What the hell was that?” Fundy looks impressed.

“Tetrakarn,” Navi says. “A barrier that reflects blades and bullets.”

“I didn’t know you had that up your sleeve,” Bad says, shaking his head.

“I just modified Dream’s Makarakarn,” Navi says, shrugging. “More importantly, are you alright, Dream?”

“All good,” Dream says, feeling tired all of a sudden. He glances over at the motionless, broken body of Shadow Derek and approaches him, pistol drawn. He’s not going to shoot him – he’s better than that; he’s just going to threaten him a little.

[Shadow](#) Derek whimpers. “G-Get away from me, you monster!”

“The only monster here is you,” Dream says. “Now, I’d like you to go back to your real self and reflect on your mistakes. *Never* go near Niki ever again.”

Shadow Derek sobs pathetically, body dissolving into tiny butterflies fluttering up to the ceiling.

[“And](#) we’re done here,” Dream says. He digs into his coat pocket for a Goho-M, frowning when he grasps the last one. He’s got to find some time to make more soon.

“I’m beat.” Skeppy eyes the Goho-M. “Let’s get outta here.”

“Same here,” Eret says. “First the Wither, now this...”

Dream throws the Goho-M to the ground and smoke settles around the chamber, tendrils of mist curling around them. Dream blinks, and finds himself at the entrance of Mementos, along with the rest of the Thieves.

“Well done, everyone,” Dream says. “Let’s go back and have a good rest.” He reaches for his phone and activates the Meta-Nav.

“Returning to the real world. Thank you for your hard work.”

*

[8/11 – TUESDAY – EVENING](#)

“So, your dad’s moving in tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” Nick yells over the deafening whirr of the vacuum. “He’s gonna use the spare bedroom.”

Clay does a double take. “You guys have spare bedroom?”

“It’s dusty and shit and we’ve never used it in years!”

Clay finishes washing the plates. Now, on to drying. The vacuum’s whirr disappears, sparing Clay’s ears, and the television begins to blare.

“The current government is clearly not competent enough to deal with the sudden rise of the Phantom Thieves. They pose a threat to our every day lives, and till they are eliminated entirely, we cannot live in peace, but only in fear.”

That voice again...Clay’s head begins to pound. He’s certain he’s heard it somewhere before...

“What’s wrong?” Floris asks, balanced on the counter.

“It’s nothing,” Clay says. Maybe it’s just his imagination. He’s probably a DJ or a news anchor with a unique, piercing voice...

“I will create a country where no one has to be afraid, where everyone can live as freely as they desire. If I am President, you can be guaranteed that I can make that happen.”

Not a DJ nor a news anchor, then.

Clay pokes his head out of the kitchen. “Who’s that?”

“Huh? Oh, this new party that’s running,” Nick says. “And this guy’s running for President. Forgot his name. Markus Singh or something.”

Right. Clay’s heard of him. His face has been increasingly popular on social media and news sites.

“If he keeps on opposing the Phantom Thieves like this…” Nick mumbles.

Clay grabs his phone. Speaking about opposing the Phantom Thieves, Blade told him something interesting he’s forgotten to inform the others.

Me: guys I forgot something

Me: blade told me something interesting the other day

Zak: and u wait till now to tell us

Me: I FORGOT IM SORRY

Darryl: aw cut him some slack

Darryl: better late than never

George: so what is it?

Me: the thing is he said that the police on our case

Me: is going to start coming to Enderlands high

“What?” Nick cries. “Why?”

“What’s happening?” Floris leaps onto the couch where Nick is sitting, peering at his phone. “Your school?”

Me: because he said that that is the place it all started

Me: I think he thinks that the phantom thieves probably have at least one member there

Darryl: then we’ll have to be more careful when talking about our operations

Eret: at least until the commotion dies down

George: I doubt the investigation will proceed before summer holidays are over though...

Eret: even so, be on your guard

Nick: yes mum

Eret: :)

The group goes quiet. There are still a couple of weeks left till summer vacation is over, so they

should be safe for now. They'll just go along their usual activities, delve into Mementos if they need to...oh, and somehow deal with the looming Medjed threat if Gina's heart doesn't change in time...

*

Hot and Humid

Chapter Summary

s links

Chapter Notes

i had this thing where in like primary school we were taught to describe singapore's weather as "hot and humid"

so everyone literally started their essays with "It was a hot and humid morning"

same energy as 一个风和日丽的早上

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

8/12 – WEDNESDAY – DAYTIME

“Are you sure about this?”

“Huh?” Darryl tilts his head. “Of course. No pain, no gain, right?”

“I mean, we just came back from Mementos,” Clay says. If he is to be entirely honest, his muscles are a little sore.

“I don’t think it’ll be anything super intense,” Darryl mumbles. “And besides, I had a good night’s sleep and a good breakfast.”

“Well then, let’s get started,” Clay says. He glances around. He’s only been to this gym a couple of times, so he’s not too familiar with the machines they have here... Then again, it depends on what kind of routine and which muscles Darryl wants to improve.

Time passes quickly with the rap and rock songs blasting from the speakers. With shed sweat and the sourness in their limbs testimony to their efforts, Clay and Darryl collapse on the workout mat, having just finished a round of push-ups.

“I’m never an exercise person and never will be.”

“Really?” Darryl looks surprised. “You know, my first impression of you is that you dabbled in sports.”

“Why would you think that?” Clay’s arms tremble as he tries to push his face off the ground to escape the stench of perspiration. “Okay, but to be really honest, I played football in middle school.”

“Why don’t you play anymore?”

Clay shrugs. “Dunno. Maybe I got lazy.”

Darryl laughs.

“Do you feel yourself getting stronger?” Clay asks.

“Maybe.” Darryl frowns. “Okay, actually, not really.”

“Exercise trains both your body and your mind. Though the seeing the results would take a while,” Clay says.

After showering and changing out into a new set of clothes, they head out into the humid streets. Darryl is looking at his phone, staring at a new message from Zak.

“He’s inviting me out to the aquarium,” Darryl says. “This Saturday.”

“Are you going to accept?”

Darryl presses his lips together. “To be honest...I think I should, but...”

“But what?”

“It’s...I don’t know.” Darryl looks torn. “I don’t know whether I should...whether I should go because...” Whatever internal conflict he’s having, it seems serious. “What if Adrian has an emergency on that day? And I’d need to go down and-I’m already such a bad friend for not visiting more often...”

“I don’t think Adrian thinks you’re a bad friend,” Clay says. “He’s not angry when you see him, right?”

Darryl chews on his bottom lip. “No...”

“And Zak is your friend too,” Clay says gently. “One day wouldn’t hurt.”

Darryl looks conflicted. “I suppose.”

“It’s your choice. Just, uh...expressing what I think.”

“I guess I’ll think about it,” Darryl says. He shoves his phone into his pocket. His expression lights up when they pass the crepe stand. Clay already knows what he’s going to say even before he opens his mouth.

“Do you want to get some crepes on the way home?”

*

8/12 – WEDNESDAY – EVENING

As it turns out, Clay’s help isn’t needed in the kitchen tonight, not when Mr Armstrong has officially moved in...moved *back* in? Clay isn’t too sure. He finds himself working on his holiday homework on Nick’s desk while Nick brawls on Super Smash Bros. Floris is snoring away on his bed and Ant is curled up on Nick’s keyboard, watching Clay’s pen scratching the worksheet with intense eyes.

“Aren’t you nervous?” Clay asks, rolling over to Nick and nudging his arm with his toes.

“Oi, oi! I’m gonna lose!” Nick mashes buttons, his character flying up from certain death and back onto the stage. He wins the round after several more button presses, the foe falling out of the screen. “And why should I be nervous?”

“I dunno. Maybe ‘cause you haven’t really talked to your dad in a while.”

“Well.” Nick puts down his Switch. “I mean, yeah. Not gonna lie. I’m kinda nervous, but I don’t think it will be that bad.”

Clay opens his mouth to answer, but there is a knock on the door, and Nick moves to open it. Mr Armstrong stands outside, the warm smile on his face partly hidden by his moustache.

“It’s time for dinner.”

The three of them head down to the dining table, Ant strutting by Clay’s feet. The table is already set, piping hot bowls of soup and salads on the table as well as four plates of macaroni.

Dinner is, initially, silent save for the clinking of cutlery and quiet chewing. Clay glances from each Armstrong to the next. Nick’s head is dipped, trying to draw as little attention to himself as possible, Mr Armstrong has a dopey smile on his face, and Mrs Armstrong just seems neutral but just borderline uncomfortable. Well, this is certainly awkward.

Ant paws at Clay’s pant leg. It meows, staring up at Clay with wide eyes.

“Is that your cat?” Mr Armstrong asks, seizing the opportunity to break the ice.

“Yeah,” Nick says, nodding. “Clay found it and he brought it back. It lives with us now.”

“What’s its name?”

“For some reason, Ant,” Mrs Armstrong says. “The boys call it that.”

“Ant, huh?”

The cat seems to understand, sidling up to Mr Armstrong’s leg and rubbing its head against it. Mr Armstrong reaches down to pet it and Ant lets him. Sometimes, the way Ant acts is so incredibly human.

It is from that moment that the mood begins to lighten. Nick speaks up more, about happenings at school. Mr Armstrong manages to coax Mrs Armstrong to spill stories about work. Clay merely watches, joining in the conversation when he is invited to. Ant purrs contentedly in his lap, as if happy that it’s accomplished its mission.

Clay and Mrs Armstrong wash up that night, while Nick and Mr Armstrong settle down for a movie in the living room.

“That was a success,” Clay says, drying the dishes and placing them back onto the dishrack. Mrs Armstrong proceeds to wash the cutlery, rinsing the sullied forks and spoons under running water.

“It was,” Mrs Armstrong agrees. “I think that perhaps, at the rate this is going, we can make good on this second chance. And it’s all thanks to you, Clay.”

“Me?”

“If I look back upon this year, you coming into our lives have really made a difference. It’s thanks to you that I can reconnect with my son again. And my husband as well.” She pauses, handing the

forks for Clay to dry. “Still, it’s only the beginning, so we’ll have to work out the knots along the way.”

Clay finishes drying the cutlery and places it back into the drawers.

“No matter what happens, Clay,” Mrs Armstrong says with a genuine smile. A *rare*, genuine smile, “you will always be a part of the Armstrong family.”

When Clay settles into bed that night, after answering several messages, he smiles involuntarily at Mrs Armstrong’s words.

You will always be a part of the Armstrong family.

Those were the warmest words he’s heard in a long time...

*

8/13 – THURSDAY – DAYTIME

“The craziest thing happened yesterday,” Niki says, a wide smile on her face. “Derek came up to me and apologized!”

He should probably have done more than apologize, but Clay figures that that is the best he can get out of a man like that.

“Well, what he was saying was rather strange,” Niki muses. “It’s almost as if he had a change of heart. You know, like what the Phantom Thieves are doing.”

Clay swallows thickly.

“Oh!” Niki sounds delighted, her grin not fading in the slightest. “Perhaps the Phantom Thieves really *did* respond to my request!”

“Your request?”

“On the Phan-Site,” Niki says excitedly. “I put up a post there after the whole incident at Valentine’s, and the Phantom Thieves really helped me!”

“Of course they did,” Clay says, nodding. Naturally. It is still rather sad, Clay thinks, that Niki finds the need to turn to a group of vigilantes, whose existence is still perceived as questionable, for help.

“I was sceptical of the whole Phantom Thieves thing,” Niki says, sipping at her smoothie. “But now, I think they’re pretty cool.”

Clay flushes. It definitely does send a pleasant warmth through him, hearing praise for their work...and for themselves and general.

“Oh, and...” Niki runs her fingers along the sides of the cup. “I forgot to thank you the other day.”

“Thank me?”

“For standing...for standing up to Derek,” Niki says shyly. “Thank you.”

Clay smiles. “It’s no problem.”

Niki leaves on a very happy note that day, heading off towards her house with a bounce in her step. Clay has a couple of hours before he has another appointment, this time at Elytra, so he can afford to rest a while.

*

8/13 – THURSDAY – EVENING

“Thanks for coming all the way out here tonight.”

Helen Park, interestingly, is quite busy at this time of the day. People are jogging, cycling, walking their dogs... Clay chomps down on his hot dog bun, wiping mustard from around his lips.

“It’s fine. I’ve got time to kill.”

Yao Yi picks at her cuticles, staring out at the lake. Even at this time of the day, there are still a few boats bobbing out in the water, rocking gently with the waves.

“You know about the whole...thing about...” Yao Yi bites her lip. “The whole thing about using you guys...I’m sorry.”

The sincerity in her tone is unmistakable. “It’s alright. As long as you change, yeah?”

“Oh, and, um, just curious but did you guys change my heart?” Yao Yi asks. “I mean, we were talking about it and now I’m...”

“Change your heart? Nah,” Clay says, finishing up his hot dog. “You did that on your own.”

“Huh?”

“Yeah,” Clay says. “I promise we did the minimum.”

“O-Oh.” Yao Yi flushes. “I see. I was thinking and, uh...I wondered if I should just quit this whole image management thing. It’s fun and all but I’m scared that I’m gonna use it for the wrong reasons.”

“Like you said,” Clay says, watching as the sun begins to set, “the Phantom Thieves wouldn’t have gotten this far without our image manager now, would they?”

Yao Yi laughs. “You sound like you’re not involved.”

Clay shrugs. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“If you wish it, I guess I can continue being your image manager,” Yao Yi says, standing up straight. “There are people out there that need help who can’t receive it, and I’ll bring their stories to you. How’s that sound?”

“Sounds great,” Clay says, holding out a fist. Yao Yi smiles and bumps it with her own. “I’m counting on you.”

*

8/14 – FRIDAY – DAYTIME

“The day of reckoning draws near.”

George chuckles. “Dramatic, aren’t we?”

Clay yawns. “Maybe.”

“Why’re you so tired?” George asks, leaning against the glass panel of the observation deck of Vance Tower. “Didn’t sleep well?”

“It’s fine,” Clay says, shaking his head, yawning again. When he closes his eyes, all he can see behind those lids is the screaming, bleeding face of Shadow Gina. “Well, since we paid to come all the way up, we’d better enjoy the view for a little bit longer.”

George frowns, but doesn’t push it. Instead, he stares out at the cityscape under the harsh sunlight. Clay has never actually seen the city from this angle before. Skyscrapers stretch as far as the eye can see, covering the hills and valleys, houses dotting the fields beyond. A flock of seagulls soar towards the ocean without a care in the world. Clay’s gaze follows them out into the open sea, at the colourful blocks of cargo stacked on the harbour, at the ships and fishing boats anchored at the jetties.

“How’s Gina’s condition?” Clay asks.

“Hmm?” George tears his eyes away from the scenery. “She’s...she’s quiet. Curses less. Still locked up in her room, though.” He frowns. “Is this normal?”

“More or less,” Clay says, eyes trained on a string of cable cars in the distance heading up to an impressive mountain. “The last few targets went through the same thing.”

“I see,” George says, returning his gaze to the city. “She’s showing signs of recovery, though, so...”

[“Oh,](#) speaking of which,” Clay says. “Did Gina say anything about...about a black mask?”

“A black mask?”

“Yeah,” Clay says. “The thing is, we’ve heard about this black mask guy from other Palace rulers and their real-life counterparts. We think he’s the one behind the mental shutdowns.”

“You mean the ones that happened in April?”

“Yeah,” Clay says, tapping his chin. “Now that I think about it, there *are* fewer cases...”

“They’re not appearing on the news as much,” George agrees. “Can we trust the words of the Palace rulers, though?”

“That’s what we thought too,” Clay says. “But why would two Palace rulers tell us the same thing?”

George hums. “Well, Gina didn’t say anything about the black mask...so maybe she wasn’t targeted by him.”

Clay nods. “Maybe.”

[“Clay,](#) I haven’t had the chance to really thank you,” George says with a sigh. “For snapping me out of it. During that fight.”

“Snapping you...oh.” Clay tries to shake away the unwanted wave of fear, reliving the exact emotions he had felt at that exact moment.

“If not for that, I really think I would have...” George laughs unsurely. “I think I would have done it, you know. Anything for Gina, really.”

Clay understands that. If someone told him to jump off a cliff in order to save his team...he probably would have done it in a heartbeat. If only for his team to be safe, to survive.

“Sorry, that got dark,” George says. He jerks his chin at the elevator. “It’s getting late. Wanna head back?”

Clay nods. It’s good to hear that Gina is doing well. Still, he wonders if it’s selfish to hope that the change of heart will happen soon. As the deadline draws nearer, the nervousness is creeping up on him. What will he do if, by then, they have to expose their identities? While he’s entirely against putting his team in jeopardy, letting the entire city fall victim to an international vigilante hacking group is not an option either. They head down the tower and towards the train station.

George waves goodbye to him from the train which Clay returns equally enthusiastically.

*

Chapter End Notes

Lovers arcana rank 5 -> 6 (BBH)
Knowledge +3 (doing homework)
Empress arcana rank 8 -> 9 (Mrs Armstrong)
Hanged Man arcana rank 5 -> 6 (Niki)
Moon arcana rank 5 -> 6 (yao yi)
Magician arcana rank 5 -> 6 (george)

The Day of Reckoning Draws Near...

Chapter Summary

s links

Chapter Notes

WARNING: mentions of child pornography + implied gore

some more s links i swear the story's gonna progress soon

ultra long chap cos i wanna progress the story but somehow i managed to write myself into another mementos situation...

im so friggin unsatisfied with this...

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

8/14 – FRIDAY – EVENING

Ant has been sitting in front of the run-down church for a long time now. Sometimes silent, sometimes mewling, a mournful sound. The rain patters around them, a fresh summer shower in the evenings. However, Ant doesn't seem to mind. Or doesn't seem to care.

Clay bends down, umbrella held over Ant's head. "Come on, it's getting cold. We don't want you getting sick."

Ant meows and gets up, striding towards the door to the church, scratching at it. Clay moves to scoop him up, but Ant deftly leaps from his grasp, rounding the exterior of the church to the back. Clay's splashes through the mud, following Ant as it zips around to the back of the church, where there appears to be a hidden back door.

Ant nudges it with its nose. The door doesn't budge. Intrigued, Clay lays his fingers against it and pushes it open. The door creaks, groaning as it swings inwards, revealing a dark chamber. Oh God, it looks like something straight out of a horror movie...not that Clay would know.

Thunder booms overhead and Clay jolts, a stab of fear coursing through him. Ant pads boldly in. Clay gulps and steps into the room, the sliver of light through the door his only guiding beacon. Slowly but surely, his eyes begin to adjust to the darkness.

What stands out in the dim room is a board. A board full of small pieces of paper pinned to it. Clay activates the flashlight on his phone and shines it on the board of messages, eyes skimming over the words.

I wish my grandfather can get healthier soon...

I wish I can apologize to my friend...

I wish that I can be granted my last wish...

All manner of requests and prayers are pinned onto the board. Some of the papers are yellowed, some are torn. Names and contact details are written on them in various styles of handwriting.

Ant huddles around Clay's legs as Clay takes in the numerous pieces of paper. Most of them are prayers, so there are around...five requests? Ant meows, tail curled around its body.

"You want me to fulfil these requests?" Could this be what Ant's previous owner had been doing?

Ant purrs. Well, Clay thinks, as he looks over the requests. They don't seem *too* difficult...and it's the least he can do for Ant and its previous owner. He'll come back and take a look at it another day. For now, it's getting late, and he's got to get home.

Ant lets Clay carry him back towards the house, licking at its paws while they walk.

*

8/15 – SATURDAY - DAYTIME

"Which do you think is better?" Tubbo gestures to two keyboards, one by Razer and the other SteelSeries. To be honest, Clay has absolutely no idea. Both brands are as foreign to him as...well...the Metaverse is to everyone *not* in the Phantom Thieves.

"Tubbo, let me be frank with you..."

"Yeah?"

"I feel like a total noob here so I don't think you should ask for my opinion."

"Oh." Tubbo looks around. "I think half the people here don't know shit either, so you're good."

Well, that certainly didn't help Clay's self-esteem.

The IT convention sounded like a fun idea when Tubbo invited him (after he couldn't reach Tommy, he said. Not like Tommy would appreciate these events, he said). However, actually standing here, in the middle of what must be tens of thousands of computer parts, signs promoting *things* that he has never heard of before, brands that have never graced his ears, Clay feels like an illiterate dumbass.

"Okay, let's switch up the question. Which one looks nicer?" Tubbo says.

"Uh...that one," Clay says, pointing to the Razer keyboard.

"Then we'll take this," Tubbo says, grabbing the box and tucking it under his arm.

The convention is pretty tame; Clay had been expecting more shoving, more jostling, more screaming. Despite the sheer number of people, Tubbo manages to make his purchases without much hassle and they exit the convention hall with way too many bags for two people.

"You never told me you were rich," Clay says as they wait for their bus. His arms are tired from hauling all these computer parts around. "These cost a ton."

"Oh, about that...my parents are big savers so we tend to have a bit of spare cash lying around," Tubbo says. "My dad recently got a promotion too."

“He was a news announcer, right?”

“TV show host,” Tubbo corrects. “New State News.”

“Oh, the same show that Blade was on.”

“Yeah, that one.”

A bus pulls up to the stop, but it’s not theirs, so Clay moves to sit on the bench, joined by Tubbo, bags placed by their feet.

“When’s the next round of your competition?”

“Hmm?” Tubbo tilts his head. “Straight after the holidays, when school reopens. I won’t be attending for the first week.”

“Are you confident?”

[“Somewhat.”](#) Tubbo says, “but there’s a lot of pressure, you know. If I don’t do well, I’m going to lose my spot in school.”

“You’re what?” Clay must not have heard clearly.

“I only got accepted because of my programming, to be honest,” Tubbo says. “If I don’t win competitions for the school, then...” He trails off, staring off into space, a tinge of sadness in his tone.

Clay isn’t sure what to say to comfort him. He’s in the same situation, a precarious position where he cannot afford to screw up. One wrong move and he’s kicked out and sent to juvenile hall.

“That won’t matter, though,” Tubbo says, eyes sparkling. “Because I’m going to win this one. For myself and my brother. Trust me.”

Clay nods. “I’m looking forward to seeing the results.”

The next bus that arrives is theirs, and the two board, tapping their bus passes on the readers. Tubbo finds a seat not far from the exit and Clay settles beside him, trying not to grimace when several people shoot them dirty looks for their giant bags of purchases literally blocking off the whole aisle.

The bus sets off towards Valentine Hills, where the two will go separate ways.

*

[8/15 – SATURDAY – EVENING](#)

“As of now, neither the Phantom Thieves nor Medjed have made a move. Despite having taunted the Phantom Thieves, Medjed seems adamant to stick to their announced deadline...”

“It’s funny how Medjed hasn’t made a move,” Eret says, staring up at the giant television screen mounted on a towering office building. Their logo, the Phantom Thieves’ logo, flashes across the screen as the news anchor continues to talk about their case.

“Yeah,” Clay says. “If they’re so...so against us, and if they’re some renowned hacking organization, then wouldn’t they have already leaked some info or something?”

Eret shrugs. The traffic light turns green and they make their way across the street, blending effortlessly into the crowd. Bowarrow Street is surprisingly noisy, a cacophony of people chatting, tyres cutting through puddles and advertisement jingles bleeding into each other.

“Where are we going?” Clay asks. The pubs and bars they pass by are closed but will probably open soon. There are a couple of narrow and dark alleys that seem to lead to nowhere, and Clay would be damned if Eret happens to have dealings with the underground.

“Investigate,” Eret says, authority evident in his voice. He frowns. “Didn’t I send you a text about it yesterday?”

Clay laughs sheepishly.

“Well, I’ve received word that a group of students have been involved in illegal affairs here in Bowarrow.”

“Wait, when was this?”

“Just yesterday.” Eret stops abruptly. Clay almost bumps into him. They wait by the traffic island as the light flashes red. Just their luck. “Asked me to investigate the group.”

“But you’re just a student. And it’s the holidays,” Clay argues. A bright red Jazz zooms by.

Eret merely shrugs. “Are you worried?”

Somewhat. Clay can only imagine what kind of mischief students get up to in places like this. “Kinda.”

Eret hums. “It’s not too late to leave if you want.”

The light turns green, and the duo continues to walk. “I’m fine with it.”

“Well,” Eret says, stopping in front of a strip mall, “I’ve done a little bit of digging, and as it turns out, quite a few schoolmates frequent this club.” He gestures to a stairway leading deep beneath the ground, a shoddy sign advertising pole- and lap-dances that appeal to all.

“But isn’t that illegal?”

“If it wasn’t, we wouldn’t be here,” Eret says. He sighs. “Let’s leave sneaking in as the last resort. We should ask around first.”

Gathering information does not prove to be as helpful as Clay would expect. There are quite a few youngsters loitering about in groups or alone, though none of them are keen to talk to them. There *was* an old man who tried to sell them drugs, but Eret stops the conversation before it gets too far. By five p.m., the sun still beats down on their backs. Clay fans himself as he leans against a fence gate which sinks beneath his weight.

“That sucked,” Clay says. “No one seemed to recognize you, either, Mr President.”

Eret stiffens. “I’d prefer if you didn’t call me that. And what do you mean by that?”

“Well, you’re kind of a hotshot in school,” Clay says. “If you haven’t noticed, you’re not exactly Mr Popular.”

“To uphold one’s duty, one must be prepared to make sacrifices,” Eret says with a dismissive wave. He perks up when he notices something in the distance. “I know that boy.”

The boy approaching the staircase does not seem to have noticed them. He wears a technicolour hoodie too bright for this side of town. He looks shady as heck, with the furtive glances he keeps throwing around.

When he gets close enough, Eret pounces like a leopard upon his unsuspecting prey.

[“Karl.”](#) Eret says, holding up a hand in greeting. Clay does not miss the way Karl jumps and shrinks back. “How’re you doing?”

“Eret!” Karl stutters. “Fancy seeing you here.”

“Same to you,” Eret says, nodding. “Why are *you* here?”

Karl gulps. “Um...I came to look for my friend who...um...told me about this place...and...”

“Do you know what kind of place this is?”

Karl’s eyes flit to the sign, and he shakes his head. “I was told that people come here to unwind... or something...”

“Who’s your friend?” Eret asks. “The one who told you about this place?”

Karl bites his lip, already inching away from them as fast as he possibly can. His phone rings all of a sudden, a blaring ringtone that catches them all off guard. Karl glances over at Eret, as if asking for permission.

“Be my guest.”

Karl answers his phone hurriedly. After a brief exchange of sentences that mostly involves apologies on Karl’s end, Karl ends the call.

“S-Sorry, my mom’s calling,” Karl says, shaking his head. “I’ve got to go now.” Turning tail, he runs towards the direction he came from, disappearing behind a tall building.

“Aren’t you going to stop him?” Clay asks.

“I have his number. I can always call him to arrange a time when he’s free,” Eret says. “Well, at least we’ve got a lead now.” The sunlight is already waning, and the pubs and bars are beginning to open, flashy signs lit up over doors, advertising for happy hours and other not-so-innocent services.

“We should get going,” Eret says. “We’re still students, and I really don’t want to get arrested.”

They reach the station in record time, briskly walking past several rowdy bunches and boisterous groups with bottles in hand.

“Thanks for coming out with me today,” Eret says with a smile. “To be honest I’ve never been out here before-“

“I don’t blame you.”

Eret nods. “Especially not at this hour. I’ll follow up on this case and inform you if there has been any progress.” He sighs. “To think that students from our school would get mixed up in this kind of business...”

“We shouldn’t judge too quickly,” Clay says. “Maybe they have their reasons.”

Eret agrees. Clay's train arrives first and he gets on, waving goodbye to Eret as he boards.

*

8/16 – SUNDAY – DAYTIME

When Clay enters the arcade, surrounded by the din of shouting and the beeps and boops of game machines. As expected, standing in front of the Gun About machine, is Tommy, battling it out with another gamer. Clay waits by the side for the game to end, the crowd dispersing once the second player loses.

Striding over, before Tommy can leave or start a new game, Clay claps a hand on his shoulder. Tommy jumps, eyes wide and whirls around, recognition flashing in his eyes.

“What are you doing here?”

“Looking for you,” Clay says. “Phil and Tubbo both said you haven’t been in contact.”

“Yeah,” Tommy says, dipping his head. “It’s for their own good. And for yours too. So you should just get the fuck away from me.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Clay frowns. “We want to help you, Tommy.”

Tommy seems to consider this. He pushes past Clay, heading out of the arcade. “Follow me, big man.”

Clay does.

Tommy leads him back down the side street near the gym that Clay frequents. [In one](#) swift move, he grabs Clay’s collar and shoves him against the wall. Clay’s skull comes into contact with the wall and he winces. His head smarts, brain rattling in his skull.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Tommy shouts, veins popping along his neck. “Why the fuck would you want to hang around someone like me? Are you a fucking idiot?”

“What do you mean?” Clay grits out. “Don’t be so cryptic and shit. That’s not like you!”

“Everyone that hangs around me is gonna die,” Tommy says. “First my parents, then my friends in the Family, and now Pokimane... You know what was my name in the Family, big man?”

Clay chooses to remain silent.

“I was called fucking ‘Death’ because everyone I was associated with died,” Tommy hisses, releasing Clay from his grip. For a fifteen-year-old, he sure is strong. “I don’t want to do that shit anymore, alright? I’m not gonna just stand by and watch my friends die again!”

“Pushing us away won’t do anything,” Clay argues.

“It fucking will! At least you won’t die! And don’t bother following me!” Tommy takes off down the alleyway, scampering out of sight. Even if Clay gives chase now, he’s not going to be able to catch up to him.

Next time, he tells himself. Next time he’s going to get Punz’s name for sure...

*

8/16 – SUNDAY- EVENING

“I think that this will be the last time I’ll be seeing you,” Wilbur says, packing up his materials. “You’re doing great and I’m sure you’ll continue to do well.”

Clay beams. There *was* a giant leap in his Literature grades and without Wilbur’s tutelage, there would have no way he could have improved so much. As it turns out, he only needed a little push, a little motivation, to ignite a modicum of interest in the subject, for him to do well.

“How’s the L’manburg coming along?”

“Great,” Wilbur says. “Alex said that he’d get back to me soon regarding the manuscript, so we’ll just see how it goes.”

“So you’ve submitted it already?”

“Yeah. Oh and speaking of which, I think I’d like to thank the Phantom Thieves for the longer deadline, and being able to complete the story.”

“Why’d you bring up the Phantom Thieves all of a sudden?”

Wilbur fixes him with a knowing smile. “Am I not speaking to one right now?”

Clay shrugs.

“Don’t worry. I won’t tell anyone,” Wilbur says, holding a finger to his lips. “This is between you and me, of course. I must have a broken moral compass if I’m going to sell you out.”

Clay smiles. “Thanks.”

“Oh, and I have something for you,” Wilbur says. He reaches into his bag and fishes out a book. In cursive, *The Unfinished Symphony* dances across its leather front.

“Is this...?”

“I won’t let my past haunt me anymore,” Wilbur straightens his back, “and leaving this behind is proof of that.”

Clay accepts the book. This was the book mentioned in that newspaper article. The second book that Wilbur had released and was accused of plagiarism. Clay wonders how long he must have felt guilty and afraid, how much keeping this around must have chained him to the past.

“I’ll gladly keep it safe.”

“Oh, you can burn it if you want, to be honest,” Wilbur says, making a shooining gesture. “I don’t have any sentimental attachment to that thing.”

“I’ll keep it.”

Wilbur laughs. “Do what you want, I guess.”

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast turned a vow into a blood oath. Thy bond shall become the wings of rebellion that break the yoke of thy heart. Thou hast awakened to the ultimate secret of the Tower, granting thee infinite power...

Clay sees Wilbur off, the final time Wilbur’s back retreats from view. It’s not like he won’t ever

see him again – he’s still friends with Tommy, Phil and Blade, after all.

He places the Unfinished Symphony on his shelf, its leather spine an excellent addition to his collection of recommended books.

*

8/17 – MONDAY – DAYTIME

“How did your date go?” Clay asks.

“My date?” Zak looks surprised. “How’d you know about that?”

Clay nearly trips on the stairs leading up to Zak’s room. Darryl sure lives in a big house. His parents are out for the next few months; it must be great to have the house all to themselves.

“I was hanging out with Darryl when he got your message.”

“Oh.” Zak shrugs. “It was great. I guess.”

“What do you mean?”

“Uh...” Zak looks sheepish. “He’s kind of avoiding me right now.”

“Is he?”

“Yeah.” Zak pushes the door to their room open, and all Clay can see is a giant canvas hosting an equally giant painting fitted on an easel.

“Ta-da!”

Clay eyes the swirling pattern, a splash of white against an ominous black-and-red background. If Zak’s expecting expert advice, he’s sorely mistaken if he thinks that Clay can be of any help.

“Well? What do you think?” He is expecting advice.

“It’s...nice.”

Zak gives him a deadpan look.

“The white and black are beautifully contrasting. And red is like the...”

Zak waves dismissively. “Well, you tried. Anyway, I’m not actually here to ask for your advice or anything.” He paces around the room, steps swallowed by the plush velvet carpet.

“You’d be here regardless of whether or not I’m here,” Clay says, folding his arms.

“Semantics, schemantics,” Zak singsongs. “I just invited you to see my completed piece. I call it ‘Desire’.”

“You based it off Mementos?”

“Yeah,” Zak says. “Doesn’t it look like Mementos? All red and black and Shadowy...”

“I guess.” Now that Clay takes a second look at it...

“Think about it. Mementos is everyone’s Palace, right? It’s everyone’s teeny weeny distorted

desires. What better way to express desire than a painting of Mementos?" Zak says, arms spread. "You have to admit it. I'm right."

"Huh."

"So, anyways, no matter whether you agree or not, I'm gonna enter this in the art exhibition," Zak says.

"Art exhibition?"

"My school's submitting works to that...that art gallery. You know the one," Zak says, shrugging, turning to stare at his artwork once more, a twinkling pride in his eyes. "Each student who gets in gets two tickets, so I was thinking of inviting you and Darryl...if he'd come."

"I wouldn't mind going." Clay has *got* to get the juicy bits on this drama happening behind the scenes.

"Great," Zak says, grinning. "It's on the twentieth."

"That's one day before Medjed attacks."

"Oh, uh..." Zak fidgets nervously.

"It's fine though," Clay says, shaking his head. If Zak needs his support, he'll be there. "I'm sure Gina will come through for us."

Zak hums, sounding like he's trying to convince himself. *Clay* sounds like he's trying to convince himself.

"I'll pass you the ticket right before the exhibit. Just come a little before opening time, yeah?"

"I'll be there."

Zak flashes him a smile. "Great. Now, out. I need to write my application and everything and I can't do it with you eyeballing me."

*

8/17 – MONDAY – EVENING

<Phoenix SC> I did a bit of digging

<Phoenix SC> and I found out what my ex-wife has been doing to my daughter

That doesn't sound good.

<Dream> What is it?

<Phoenix SC> turns out they're making her wear revealing dresses and taking pictures of her

<Phoenix SC> god knows where they end up

<Phoenix SC> thing is their financial situation isn't the best right now

<Dream> is it possible to go to the police with this?

<Phoenix SC> not unless I have proof because it's not like my financial situation is any better

<Phoenix SC> god

<Phoenix SC> I seriously don't know what to do right now

<Dream> What's your ex-wife's full name

<Phoenix SC> hey now, I don't just give that out to some random guy on the internet

<Phoenix SC> what are you going to do with it

<Dream> I think the phantom thieves can help

<Phoenix SC> oh you mean that group that's quite big now?

<Phoenix SC> I guess that's what they do...

<Phoenix SC> you in cahoots with them?

<Dream> no

<Dream> but you can post the full name of someone whose heart you want to change

<Dream> on the Phan-Site

<Phoenix SC> on the phan-site huh?

<Phoenix SC> I guess I'll try that...

<Phoenix SC> but even so I'll need to think of another way to help my daughter

There is a pause as Phoenix SC's avatar stares up at the sky, at the blocky sun setting beneath the hills.

<Phoenix SC> also thanks a lot though for being here

<Phoenix SC> and for listening to my problems even though im just some random guy on the internet to you

<Dream> it's no problem

Well now, this is a problem. It doesn't sound like his daughter has been forced to do anything extreme yet, but it's only a matter of time. He hopes that Phoenix SC would actually post something on the Phan-Site. He'd better keep in touch with Yao Yi for that...

Clay logs off that night with a seed of worry in his heart. Medjed's deadline is coming up soon. Even so, they can't ignore someone in need...

For now, all they can do is wait.

*

[8/18 – TUESDAY – DAYTIME](#)

Tommy isn't at the arcade today. Neither is he answering his messages. Clay stands amidst the ear-piercing beeps and virtual gunshots and deafening jingles. Perhaps he could head on over to Untouchable and ask Phil about it, but if not even Tubbo could contact him...Moreover, what Tommy said about being "Death"...it worries Clay to no end.

Clay is on his way out of the arcade when he notices a mop of dirty blond hair and a flash of red-and-white disappear behind a wall. He gives chase, pounding the pavement as he throws caution to the wind and rushing across the road. He barely makes it, eardrums ruptured by the blare of a horn.

[He dashes](#) down the side street, only to reach an intersection, branching out to seedier alleyways dark as dark can be. A racoon chitters, darting away from a trash can. Where could he have gone?

A crow caws in tandem with the crash of metal against concrete and a terrified scream. Clay rushes off in the direction of the scream, only to find Tommy on the ground, staring at a mass of...oh God. The stench is horrible, the only source from a decomposing mass, dignity protected within a bloodied duffel bag. Clay resists the urge to puke.

"Tommy," Clay edges over and places a hand on Tommy's shoulder. Tommy is shaking, inching away from the duffel bag. "Tommy. Let's get away from here."

"Manifold...I can't..." Tommy whimpers, curling up into a ball, drawing his knees up to his chest. "Oh God..."

That's it. That's the last straw. By hook or by crook, Clay is getting Punz's name out of Tommy.

"Tommy, what's Punz's full name?" He winces. It's harsh, but he must know. Clay is about to shake Tommy's shoulders again when a deep voice resounds from behind him. He glances up to find Blade standing there, phone in hand, a serious expression on his face.

"Tommy," Blade says, placing his phone back into his pocket. "What the hell..." His eyes trail from Tommy's helpless foetal form to the mess in the duffel bag giving off that awful smell.

"Oi," Blade says, gesturing to the street behind him. "Get Tommy out of here. I need to call backup."

Clay does as he is told, hauling Tommy to his feet and letting Tommy cling to him. Tommy isn't crying, he's just shuddering, limbs weak, as Clay moves him over from the alleyway to Untouchable, shielding him from curious gazes of the passers-by.

"Clay? What? Tommy?" Phil looks dumbfounded, rising from his seat and crossing the store in several steps. The duo gets Tommy into the break room, sitting him down on a plastic stool. Clay prepares a cup of water while Phil tries to talk to Tommy.

"They killed him, Phil. They fucking killed him!"

Clay presses the glass of water into Tommy's hands, who accepts it gratefully. He takes a large gulp from it, nearly choking on it. Phil hands him a piece of tissue.

"Tommy," Clay says sternly. "I need Punz's name. Full name."

Phil shoots him a scathing look. Tommy seizes up at the name, eyes wide with fear. Clay kicks himself mentally, but he must have this information. He simply must.

"It's Luke Punz," Tommy says in a voice wobbly from holding back tears. "But...what are you going to do about it?"

"Don't worry," Clay says. "Just focus on resting up."

"I think...I think I'll rejoin them. The Family," Tommy says, staring at the ground. "If I do, then no one else will die..."

"Tommy..." Clay tucks his hands into his pockets. "Please reconsider." Tommy must have put in so much effort to leave the mafia when he could, to fit in with the people around him, to live life like a normal teenager. He can't just throw it all away because of...he can't throw it all away, period.

"Don't stress about it for now," Phil says calmly. "We can handle ourselves." He jerks his chin at the door, silently asking Clay to leave...probably because Clay has already caused more trouble than he's worth. Clay silently exits the store, the bell jingling as he leaves.

He's got to talk to the team about this and formulate a plan of attack.

*

8/18 – TUESDAY – EVENING

"That's fucked up," Nick says, chewing on a corn chip. "Killing someone to force Tommy back into the gang?"

"Yeah, it seems that way," Clay says, biting his lip. His fingers fly over the keyboard as he types rapidly into the group chat.

Zak: I say we take him down

Darryl: agreed

Eret: If there are no objections, I propose to go into Mementos tomorrow. Before Medjed strikes.

George: im free

Darryl: same

Zak: yeah

Nick: yep

Me: if everyone is available, then it's settled. We'll go into Mementos tomorrow. I'll just let cheng know to post a warning on the Phan-Site.

"You want some?" Nick asks, holding out the bowl. Clay shakes his head, searching his contacts list for Yao Yi's number and dialling it. The ringtone bleeps in his ear, almost as annoying as the buzzing of a mosquito.

Yao Yi, thankfully, picks up on the first three rings.

"Ooh. I was just about to call you," Yao Yi says delightedly. "Do you need anything?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact," Clay says. "I need you to post a warning on the Phan-Site to this guy called Luke Punz."

"A warning. Alright, gotcha."

"And you have something for me too?"

"Yeah," Yao Yi says. Clay hears the sound of click-clacketing keys on the other end. "I saw this post on the Phan-Site about a malicious couple taking pictures of their underage daughter that are borderline sexual. I was thinking that that would be a grave enough target for you."

“That would be great. What’s their full name?”

“Yvonne Mathilda Blossomfield. Oh, and there's a Hammie Hillsworth too,” Yao Yi says, then pauses. “Gee, that’s a mouthful.”

“Good job.”

“Thanks.” Yao Yi’s tone is placid, but Clay can almost sense the underlying vein of happiness in her voice. “I try.”

“I expect greater things from you.”

“Yes sir!”

Clay puts down the phone. “Right then, we’ve got another target’s name. I’ll share it with the rest of the group.”

“Okay,” Nick says, whistling. He continues to surf the channels, putting on soap opera after talk shows after game shows after soccer games. Clay’s head is still spinning from the recent developments, from Phoenix SC’s daughter’s grievous situation to Tommy’s terrible tragedy.

He yawns, the floor seemingly swaying beneath his feet. Good Lord, he probably needs some sleep.

He staggers up to his room and collapses into his bed, closing his eyes and willing the migraines to leave him be, for the world to stop spinning and for the summer nights to stop feeling so goddamn *cold*.

Chapter End Notes

Devil arcana rank 2 -> 3 (AntFrost)
Kindness +3 (taking care of Ant)
Emperor arcana rank 3 -> 4 (eret)
Death arcana rank 5 -> 6 (tommy)
Tower arcana rank 9 -> 10: MAX (wilbur)
Knowledge +3 (tuition)
Star arcana rank 3 -> 4 (skeppy)
Death arcana rank 6 -> 7 (tommy)
Moon arcana rank 6 -> 7 (yao yi)

Daughter's Just A Meal Ticket

Chapter Summary

mementos run + some other events

Chapter Notes

hello im back with this chap :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

8/19 – WEDNESDAY – DAYTIME

“That’s Blossomfield’s Shadow,” Fundy says. The woman stands with her boyfriend, both figures radiating black auras from their bodies, the familiar black flames blazing by their feet. The man must be a certain Hammie Hillsworth.

“Oh look who’s here,” Shadow Blossomfield says, arms around the neck of her boyfriend, who smirks with an equal sort of evil upon his lips. “The famed Phantom Thieves.”

“You have to stop,” Dream says, stepping forward. “You can’t do that to your daughter?”

“Why?” Shadow Blossomfield says, leering at them. “She’s a pretty young thing with such a curvy figure. She needs to put them to good use while she’s still not old and wrinkly.”

“Besides, isn’t it a child’s duty to help their parents in their time of need?” Shadow Hammie says, an arm snaking around Shadow Blossomfield’s waist. “We need the money, you know, to survive in this world. And we need money now.”

“Why don’t you guys try getting a real job, huh?” Sappnap spits. “God, I hate people like you.”

“People like us?” Shadow Blossomfield sounds offended. She titters. “Are you serious right now? We’re doing all that we can to stay alive. What’s so wrong about that?”

“It’s how you’re doing it,” Dream says. “You’re obviously not fit to be a parent.”

“What’s that?” Shadow Blossomfield erupts. Dream can almost see the steam streaming from her ears. “I dare you to say that again!”

Dream throws an arm up to shield himself from the sudden roar of the veil of fire. Emerging from the flames are two unsightly creatures, horns sprouted from their heads, bat-like wings shooting from their spines.

“Incubus and Succubus,” Navi says, hopping into Necronomicon. “Watch out. They’re strong!”

Dream summons Lachesis. Already, the weaker Shadows are beginning to gather by their feet, wriggling masses of black latching on to their legs. Dream shoots one in the mask and kicks it

away, the mass dissolving into a pile of lifeless goo.

“Incubus is weak to Agi, and Succubus is weak to Bufu,” Navi says. “Don’t use Eiga or Agi skills on Succubus!”

Dream ducks, barely avoiding a fireball from Shadow Blossomfield that sails right over his head. He sends Fundy and Eret to deal with the weaker Shadows while the rest of them focus on the stronger ones, the bigger catches.

Succubus is weak to Bufu, Navi said. Lachesis conjures an icicle from the ground, piercing straight up at Shadow Blossomfield, but she dodges it easily, laughing as she sends a fireball at him.

Bad steps in, dispersing the fireball completely, cinders fizzling. He sends his own barrage of fireballs at Shadow Hillsworth, but he merely laughs and dives to the side, fireballs barely missing his petite figure.

“Oh my God! Stop flying, you piece of fuck!” Sappnap rages, swinging his cudgel wildly, only for Shadow Hillsworth to dart and swerve. He raises a claw and a wave of darkness assaults Sappnap, consuming him like a pincer and shoving him against the wall.

God, there’s no way they can hit either of them if they keep flying around like that. No matter how many icicles Dream and Skeppy call forth, no matter how many fireballs Bad hurls, they’re just going to keep missing and expend all their energy.

That’s when the Shadow duo will attack.

“Dream!”

Navi cloaks Dream’s body in a blue shroud right before Dream falls victim to Shadow Blossomfield’s pillar of fire. He stumbles back, fire caught on his clothes, burning through the fabric and skin. Quickly, he switches to Isis, weaving green wisps from his fingers. If Navi hadn’t cast that Rakukaja in time...God, he can kiss Navi right now.

“Head in the game, Dream,” Sappnap says, back bumping against his, cudgel raised to block another sphere of darkness. Dream sends an arrow of light at Shadow Hillsworth, gritting his teeth when Shadow Hillsworth dodges.

“Dream, Sappnap, can you distract the Shadows for a moment?” Navi says. “Bad and Skeppy’s got a plan.”

Dream eyes the duo, blocking attacks from across the room. Well, he could trust them...

“Sappnap, you take Shadow Blossomfield. I’ll deal with the other guy.” Dream begins to move, feet tapping deftly against gravel as he rushes Shadow Hillsworth, switching Isis out for Lachesis.

“Haven’t you learned?” Shadow Hillsworth laughs. His sphere of darkness smashes into the ground next to Dream, dust and dirt splashing everywhere. “You can’t hit me no matter how much you try?”

Dream doesn’t reply, instead spamming his strongest Bufu skills. Icicles fly from his fingers, shattering as they hit the ground and walls. He doesn’t need to hit him, just keep him on his toes. Exhaustion begins to catch up on him,

“Man, this is getting boring.” Shadow Hillsworth readies his claws, swooping straight for Dream.

“Dream, Sapnap, duck!”

Dream drops to the ground, something hot and chilly shooting past the top of his head, missing his hair by mere centimetres. He barely manages to see the launched attack – a ball of fire trailing inches behind a ball of ice. The ice ball cracks and breaks just before striking Shadow Hillsworth, the fireball taking its place and crashing him to the ground, seared wings and limbs and all.

Another high-pitched scream rings out on the other end of the chamber as well, and Dream can only assume that Shadow Blossomfield has been taken down as well.

[“What](#) the hell was that?” Sapnap cheers, giving Skeppy a high-five.

“You hid the fireball behind the ice,” Dream says, still in awe. He gives Bad a pat on the shoulder.

“And the ice behind the fireball for Blossomfield,” Bad says, smiling. “But for that to work, we gotta make them arrogant, so that’s why we needed you to distract them.”

Now that the two bigger Shadows had been subdued, the weaker Shadows slink away, melting into the walls. Shadow Blossomfield and Shadow Hillsworth huddle against each other, quaking visibly as Dream approaches them.

[“Well now,”](#) Dream says, “are you going to exploit your daughter again?”

“Please don’t kill us!”

Dream draws his pistol. “Didn’t you hear me?”

Ugly, fat tears roll down Shadow Blossomfield’s cheeks. “We swear not to! We promise!”

The two Shadows dissolve into butterflies as Dream holsters his pistol. Well, that’s one down. One more to go. They head back into the Fundybus and leave the chamber, heading further down into Mementos to confront their other target.

*

[“That’s](#) Punz’s Shadow.”

Punz stands amidst a wreath of black flames, sizzling and crackling. His golden eyes hold malice, yet they seem to carry a hint of...sorrow as well. Dream furrows his brows. What kind of Shadow are they dealing with here?

“The Phantom Thieves have come for me?” Shadow Punz tucks a hand into his pocket, the other throwing his white hoodie over his head. “You guys are seriously...sick.”

“*We’re* the sick ones?” Dream shouts, outrage burning in his throat. “*You* were the one who killed Tommy’s friends! You hurt him so badly for your own selfish gains!”

“Selfish? You dare call me selfish?” Shadow Punz’s eyes flare. He coughs, a trail of bloodied spittle running down his chin. “A leader must be more than willing to commit any atrocity to ensure their organization’s survival. The survival of the Family hinges on whether Tommy decides to rejoin us.”

“Why Tommy? What’s with this fixation on him?” Dream asks, voice low.

“Oh, wouldn’t you like to know?” Punz says, laughing. “Tommy was not always the sweet little thing you’re familiar with.”

[That](#) doesn't matter right now. Dream readies his blade, as does the rest of the Thieves as Shadow Punz transforms, a silver-skinned humanoid figure wielding a sharp knife, his lower half buried in a wrinkly boulder, red hot magma spilling from the cracks.

Shadow Punz, with a wave, summons several other Shadows, rising from the ground in shapeless black blobs. Dream barely dodges one as it makes a grab for him. Fundy stabs it in the mask, the Shadow bursting to ashes.

"He's not strong against anything, but he's weak to Eiha skills! Does anyone have Eiha?"

Dream cycles through the list of Personas in his head, trying valiantly to recall what Personas he's got on him. He quickly summons Pisaca, firing a beam of darkness at Shadow Punz, only for the beam to bounce off him like a ping pong ball, deflected to the ground and blasting a crater in the gravel.

"I thought you said he was weak to Eiha skills!"

"I said Eiha not Mudo!"

Oh. Well then.

Dream switches Pisaca out for Anzu just as Shadow Punz assaults them with full-on tornadoes, swirling storms that rip up everything in its path.

"Fundy! With me!" Dream battles Shadow Punz's unrelenting gusts with his and Fundy's wind sickles, blades spinning through the air like homing boomerangs, fighting the storm to reach its target.

One sickle meets its mark, lopping Shadow Punz's arm off, black blood spurting from the wound. His knife clatters to the ground. Shadow Punz makes a grab for his blade, only for Eret to dive in and grab it before he does. Robin Hood drives an arrow through Shadow Punz's back, spraying even more of that unholy blood on the ground.

Shadow Punz lurches forward, coughing out a gobule of black which splatters onto his palm. His movements are slower, weaker as he turns around to face the Thieves, knocked back by a blow to the head from Sapnap's cudgel.

["Wait,](#) stop!" Dream shouts, holding up a hand. Skeppy instantly puts his katana down, the remnants of ice magic fizzling away from around the blade.

"What's wrong?" Navi asks.

Despite the clear opportunity, Shadow Punz does not strike. He instantly returns to his human form, a trail of blood trickling from his lips.

"You're dying," Dream states as a matter-of-factly.

Shadow Punz's chuckle lacks mirth as he wipes the blood with the back of his hand. "Took you long enough."

"You wanted Tommy to replace you as the head of the Family. Is that it?" Eret asks, stepping in.

"Saw right through me," Shadow Punz says, holding up his hands in surrender. "You should have seen him before he got picked up by the police. A real feral child, that one."

Dream shakes away images of Tommy as a child, standing over a dead body with a smoking gun in hand. He always knew Tommy grew up surrounded by violence and death, but he has never once considered such scenarios.

“Then he got ‘rescued’ by that detective,” Shadow Punz says. “Then he tried to leave his heritage behind.”

“His heritage was never with the Family,” Dream says flatly. “Don’t waste Tommy’s efforts to be a better person just because of that. Find someone else who’s as capable. Tommy’s just a kid, for God’s sake.”

Shadow Punz laughs. “You just don’t see the potential in him as I do. But no matter. I guess I’ll take you up on that suggestion.”

“As you should have eons ago,” Fundy agrees.

Shadow Punz disappears into a million butterflies, the pretty things fluttering in a magical spiral into the ceiling and vanishing. Now Tommy wouldn’t have to live in fear anymore. Not for his life, nor anyone else’s.

[“It’s](#) time to go,” Dream says. “Unless you guys wanna stay in Mementos for a little while longer?”

“I’ve got an art exhibition tomorrow,” Skeppy says. “So, uh, no thanks.”

“And we’ve got to go to said art exhibition,” Bad says, nudging Dream’s shoulder.

“Well then,” Eret says, clapping his hands. “It’s about time we leave.”

Returning to the entrance of Mementos, Dream pulls out his phone and activates the Meta-Nav.

“Returning to the real world. Thank you for your hard work.”

*

[8/19 – WEDNESDAY – EVENING](#)

“You okay?”

Floris looks up from where he’s perched at his corner on Clay’s bed. Clay settles beside him on his belly, poking at Floris’ side.

“I’m fine.”

“You sick or something? You haven’t been looking too good.”

Floris doesn’t answer.

“We could get you to the vet’s.”

“I’m human. I don’t need a vet.” That retort has remarkably less enthusiasm than Clay expected. There’s definitely something up with him, but he just doesn’t know what, and Floris just stubbornly refuses to open up about it.

Clay picks up a book from the shelf and begins to read, eyes skimming over the words but hardly able to digest anything. The pounding of the rain against the windows aren’t helping in his concentration either. His gaze flits to Floris’ back every few seconds, wondering whether he’d just

turn around and crawl back to this side of the bed.

He jolts at the sudden cheer from below – Nick and Mr Armstrong must be watching a basketball game or something. Ant purrs, tail curling even closer to its body.

That night, when Floris is sound asleep, Clay carefully moves him over to his side of the bed, draping the blanket over his tiny, shivering body.

*

8/20 – THURSDAY – DAYTIME

“There are more people than I expected there to be,” Darryl says, staying close to Clay as they wander the exhibition. Clay has never seen so many different styles, felt so many different emotions all at once in one place. He doesn’t see Zak though.

“What’s up with you and Zak, by the way?” Clay asks.

“Me and...and Zak?” Darryl stammers. Clay doesn’t miss the reddened tips of his ears.

“Yeah. He said you were avoiding him after your aquarium date.”

“First of all, it’s not a date,” Darryl says, the red spreading to his cheeks. “Second of all, I’m not avoiding him.”

“You totally walked off without him after we left Mementos yesterday.”

“I didn’t! It was going to rain and I didn’t want to get wet!”

Clay raises an eyebrow, and Darryl sighs exasperatedly.

“He...uh...asked me out.”

Clay raises the other brow.

“Okay, I’d like to say first that I think he is way gutsier than you,” Darryl says. Clay resists the urge to slap his shoulder. “But the thing is...”

“You turned him down?”

“I told him I’d...uh...think about it,” Darryl says, fidgety. “It’s not a definite no nor yes. I...um...”

“Well, are you interested?”

“Interested? In what way?”

For such a clever guy, Darryl sure is dumb. “Uh, romantically. What other way is there?”

“Uh...”

Unfortunately for the both of them, Darryl doesn’t give him a direct answer because Zak chooses that moment to interrupt them with a giant wave and a loud yell.

Clay knows that Zak standing nearer him is not a coincidence.

“What are you guys doing back here?” Zak gestures to the direction he’s bounded over from. “My piece is over there.”

Wriggling through the throngs of people, Zak leads the duo over to where his artwork, *Desire*, is displayed. There is quite a crowd gathered in this section. An elderly couple, in particular, is staring at Zak's work. The woman makes a less-than-favourable remark, her husband nodding in agreement, before heading off.

"That was harsh," Clay says.

"Yeah. I don't think it's that bad," Darryl says, inspecting the work.

"It's fine," Zak says, waving a hand. "They don't have the eye of an artist."

The trio stay close to the wall, ears perked up, as another man approaches the painting, his fingers clasped behind his back. He remains silent and motionless for the longest time, as if his eyes are shooting lasers into the black void itself.

"This guy looks like he knows something about art," Zak whispers.

"It's not bad," the man muses to himself. "But it's not *good*."

Zak's face falls. He strides up to the man. "What do you mean?"

The man turns, surprised. "Are you the artist?"

"Yeah," Zak says, straightening his shoulders. "What do you mean it's not good?"

"Well, your technique is amazing for one as young as yourself; I can see why they'd choose to display it," the man says. "However, your painting lacks...depth. I cannot sense the 'heart' behind it."

"The heart..." Zak glances from the man back to his painting.

"Nothing about this painting tells me about '*Desire*'," the man says. "Or rather, your perception of it. Perhaps you'd like to go back and think on it." He fishes a card from his breast pocket and holds it out to Zak. *Giovanni Rossi*, Clay reads. *Director of the Fariold Youth Arts Foundation*.

"Still, I think that with a little support and help, you can fulfil your potential and be a marvellous artist," Rossi says. "Our mission at Youth Arts is to provide funding and endorsements to the artists under us, to help them hone their skills and to succeed in the art world. If you're interested, do give me a call."

Zak grasps the card loosely between his fingers. Rossi flashes him a well-meaning smile and walks over to another painting.

"You're pretty quiet for once," Clay observes.

"You know what?" Zak says, glancing from the business card to his painting, then back to the business card again. "I think he's absolutely right."

"About your painting?" Darryl asks.

"Yeah." Zak approaches his painting, the card stuffed into his pocket. "He's right, man. This painting doesn't scream '*Desire*' at me. It's like I just threw black onto a canvas and called it art."

"And red and white," Clay points out.

"Don't beat yourself up about it," Darryl says. "I mean, you can always improve on the next one."

“Okay,” Zak says, taking a deep breath, stumbling away from the painting. “Oh my God. I’ve never felt this bad about an artwork before. Shit.”

“Language.”

“Well, that was a disaster,” Zak says. “You want me to take you on a tour around the other exhibits?”

Clay and Darryl exchange glances.

“Sure,” Clay says. Zak’s features light up, eager to get away from his piece, it seems. He prances down the hallway merrily, dragging them all over the gallery, looking at sculptures and models and portraits that Clay cannot quite understand.

The rest of the exhibition was a grand success, and Zak sends them off just before the gallery closes.

*

8/20 – THURSDAY – EVENING

Zak: yo tomorrow’s the deadline

Nick: did gina say anything, George?

George: she hasn’t woken up yet

Darryl: now what?

Darryl: we’re out of time

George: wait

George: she just came out of her room

She just came out of the room? The stone that had sunk to the bottom of Clay’s stomach suddenly rises as hope fills him. The chat log fills with messages, but George has disappeared from the conversation altogether.

All they can do is wait for George’s update. Clay’s palms are clammy, his breaths coming out in puffs as he lets his arm fall onto the bed. He stares up at the ceiling.

“God,” Nick says, relief in his tone. “We’re saved.”

“We can’t celebrate too early,” Clay says.

“Gina woke up?” Floris asks, digging his snout into Clay’s arm.

“Yeah.”

When Clay’s phone buzzes, his arm shoots up and unlocks his phone, finding a few new messages from George and the rest of the team.

George: she’s going to settle the threat after dinner

George: I’m sure we’ll be fine now

Me: We're counting on you gina

Me: tell her that for us

George: will do

Eret: then we can rest easy

Nick: we should go somewhere as a celebration after this

Zak: beach

Me: let's wait for the results first

Eret: Clay's right. We shouldn't get too cocky

Darryl: in that case, let's rest tonight and we'll meet up tomorrow

Me: George, can we meet up at your house

George: I think it's fine. Im not sure how gina would feel about it though

George: I'll ask her about it and let u guys know

Me: well then have a nice night, everyone

The conversation dries up after that. Clay sinks back into the bed, suddenly drained. Like he can sleep for more than a thousand years. All they've got to do now is to wait for Gina to work her magic.

Tomorrow is the day of reckoning, and they are prepared to meet what's to come.

Chapter End Notes

Star arcana rank 4 -> 5 (skeppy)

Medjed Menace Eliminated: The Training Begins

Chapter Summary

medjed defeated + gina's training begins!

Chapter Notes

happy halloween!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

8/21 – FRIDAY – DAYTIME

Clay rings the doorbell. Once, twice...On the third ring, there is a clambering sound from within and George greets them at the door.

“Sorry about that,” George says. “I was helping Gina down the stairs.”

“Why not get a ramp? Or an elevator?” Nick asks, removing his shoes when he enters, placing it by the shoe rack.

“Money’s tight,” George says, voice clipped.

Gina is already waiting for them by the dining table, headphones over her ears, playing a game on her phone, barely even looking up when the Thieves file into the room, laying the bags of McDonald’s on the table.

“Cheapskates. You guys are all cheapskates.” George laughs. He nudges Gina’s arm. “No phones at the table.”

Gina glares at her screen but removes her headphones anyway and places her phone at the side of the table. Her entire body is tensed, staring at the tablecloth.

Clay moves to distribute the food. A Big Mac for Nick...a Coke for Darryl...

“Gina, don’t be rude.”

“I know that.” Gina pouts. Shyly, she looks up, eyes meeting Clay’s. “The Medjed...” She swallows. “The Medjed threat...is gone. I dealt with them last night.”

“The news should be on now,” George says, moving to grab the remote controller. Clay nibbles at a fry as the television blinks on, the green symbol of Medjed spinning slowly on-screen as the news anchor announces Medjed’s withdrawal from the war.

“Hey, look.” Darryl holds up his phone, opened to Medjed’s official website, under their official Announcements page.

Will No Longer Interfere With The Activities Of The Phantom Thieves.

[“God](#) bless,” Zak says, dipping his chicken nugget into the dollop of ketchup on the plastic saucer.

“Then we can celebrate,” Nick says, munching down on his Big Mac. “Let’s go to the beach.”

“Yeah! We’ve been so caught up over this Medjed thing all summer,” Zak says.

“Well, it can’t hurt to unwind,” Eret agrees. “We can go before school reopens.”

“Wait, when is that again?” Clay asks, sitting upright. The very thought of their holidays nearing its end...Clay shudders.

“September first,” Eret says. “The calendar’s on the school website.”

“Gina, do you want to come along?” Darryl asks. “It would be an experience.”

Gina seems to ponder this. If what George says is true, then Gina would not have left her house for ages. While he’s certain that she’s leaning towards a negative answer, the fact that she *hesitated*...

“It would be fun,” George says. “I’ll be there the whole time.”

“But the beach is...” Gina picks at her food, a pickle dropping from her burger onto the tablecloth.

“There are beach wheelchairs,” Nick says. “I’ve seen those before.”

“Lots of people,” Gina mumbles.

“You can just stick with us,” Clay says.

“But...”

“How about some training?” Eret suggests. “We can train you to be around people for a couple of days, then we can schedule the beach outing at the end of the training?”

Gina looks appalled that he’d even suggest such a thing. For a second, at least. She dips her head, pursing her lips.

“You don’t have to do it if you don’t want to,” George says gently.

“No!” Gina fixes him with an offended glare. “I’m gonna do it.” She turns to Eret with the fieriest eyes. “Bring on your training! I’m gonna prove George wrong!”

“So, how are we gonna go about doing this?” Clay asks.

“Simple. We progressively introduce Gina to places with more and more people,” Eret says. “And each of us can take turns spending time with her.”

“How many people is...’more and more people’?” Gina asks.

“We can start off at Helen Park in the morning,” Eret says. “There usually aren’t that many people there at that time.”

Gina shoots him a look. “In the morning?”

Eret returns with an incredulous expression, “You want to stroll under the hot sun at midday?”

Gina seems to contemplate this. “You got a point there.”

As they wrap up their lunch, Clay can’t help but notice Gina choosing to speak to only George and Eret, getting into a heated argument with the latter about some television series that Clay has never heard of.

The group leaves with the promise that they will return tomorrow early in the morning. Eret and Nick will take the first day. Zak will take the second, and Nick (again) and Darryl the third. Since Clay would be bored out of his mind with no current targets, he doesn't mind accompanying the group on all three days. Naturally, George will be there the whole time. Their beach outing will be on the fourth day, on the twenty-fifth.

Clay can’t help but notice the light that has returned to Gina’s eyes. The void of guilt that has disappeared alongside the change of her heart. They’re successful again this time round and have cleared the doubts festering in George and Gina’s hearts for the longest time.

They’re on a roll, and Clay will be damned if anything were to happen to the Thieves now.

*

[??/?? - ??? - ???](#)

“So you managed to defeat the hacking group with a hacker of your own?” Mrs Armstrong looks impressed. “And this hacker is the sister of one of your associates.”

“That’s right.”

“I see.” Mrs Armstrong leans back against her chair, thoughtful. She shakes her head and sighs. She reaches for her file and flips it to the next page.

Clay’s eyes narrow as he comes face to face with a darker-skinned, middle-aged man, hair swept to one side. His bespectacled face holds an expression of solemnness. Clay’s heart clenches as he remembers exactly the events that had transpired.

“This man, Andre Lee, was your next target,” Mrs Armstrong says. “Won’t you tell me what happened here? Why *that* happened?”

Clay dips his head. Not his proudest moment, but he doesn’t have a choice.

*

[8/21 – FRIDAY – EVENING](#)

“So, we’re going to the beach!” Nick says. Clay can hardly hear him over the vacuum’s roar. “On Monday. Best way to end the holidays, yeah?”

“I really don’t wanna go back to school,” Clay says, turning the page of his book. It’s a novel he found in an old bookshop at Beatty, about the kindness of the wanted outlaw, Zorro.

“Same man, same,” Nick says. “But hey, the school trip’s coming up.”

“School trip?”

“As soon as we go back.” Nick switches the vacuum cleaner off, placing it back in the storeroom. “A couple of days in, I think.”

“Where are we going?”

“Dunno. Every year we go Hawaii, I think,” Nick says. “I wanna go to Hawaii.”

Clay has never been out of the country, so the prospect of a school trip, with the rest of his friends, to an area known for its white beaches and their unique culture...it would certainly be an experience to remember.

“I can’t wait to see you in a grass skirt.”

Floris snorts, perched on the couch. He’s so quiet nowadays that Clay almost forgets that he’s even there. Nick too, from the looks of it, given his slight flinch at the sound.

“Sorry, but foxes can’t come,” Nick says, shrugging unapologetically.

“Doesn’t sound like it’s a place for me anyway,” Floris says snobbishly.

“We’ll probably have to drop you off at Zak’s or Eret’s or something,” Clay says. “There’ll be no one to feed you otherwise.”

“I can take care of myself, thank you very much,” Floris says. He picks himself off the couch and leaps to the ground, ambling up to their room.

Nick and Clay watch him go.

“Is he throwing a tantrum?” Nick whispers.

“Maybe,” Clay says. “He’ll get over it.”

He closes his book and yawns. Tomorrow begins Gina’s training at Helen Park. Early in the morning. Eret’s talking seven a.m. or so. Considering that he takes around ten minutes by bus to reach Helen Park...yeah, he’ll just meet them there.

Clay glances at the clock. It’s only eleven p.m.

Early to bed, early to rise, they say.

*

??/? - ??? - MIDNIGHT

Clay drags himself over to the barred door, the only thing keeping him from the long-nosed creature who sits behind his desk, wearing that ever-present grin. Inquisitive eyes on him. He can see, oh-so-clearly, every tap of his fingers upon the table, every relaxed breath. Has Clay’s powers of observation been getting stronger?

“Welcome back to my Velvet Room,” Igor says. “I see you have taken down your next adversary. Very impressive.”

“We didn’t do it alone,” Clay says.

“Nevertheless, it is a fantastic feat,” Igor says. “I wonder who you will pick as your next target, Trickster, given your rising popularity.”

Clay dips his head, a smile growing on his face. Rising popularity, eh? It is only normal that they would be more well-known, to be more celebrated, since they have defeated such a big and

renowned organization.

“But remember this,” Igor says. “The higher you climb, the further you’ll fall.”

Clay narrows his eyes at those ominous words. Igor does not mean what Clay thinks he means... right?

“You are progressing very well towards your end goal of rehabilitation,” Igor says. “I wish you the best of luck.”

Clay falls asleep then, and returns to the real world at the blare of his alarm.

*

8/22 – SATURDAY – MORNING

It’s only seven, but the sun is already beating down on them mercilessly...if not for the thick canopies that filter most of the sunlight. There is the usual fare: joggers, bikers, an elderly couple seated on the bench, scattering breadcrumbs for peckish ducks and pigeons.

Gina jumps as a man bypasses them on his rollerblade, gliding down the hill as he answers a call.

“Isn’t that dangerous?” Gina says, squinting at the man. “He’s not even wearing a helmet.”

George hums. “That *is* dangerous.”

“Then why does he still do it? It’s dangerous,” Gina huffs. She shakes her head. “That doesn’t make sense.”

“Maybe he’s too lazy to wear it,” Clay says, clicking his tongue.

Gina pouts, fidgeting with her phone. “Humans are weird.”

Eret laughs. “You say that like you’re not human.”

Gina shoots him a look. “I prefer computers. At least they’re not dumb.”

They travel along the asphalt path till they find a drinks stall nestled in the heart of the park, several benches dotting its vicinity. Clay orders smoothies for all of them while Eret and Zak attempt to engage Gina in conversation.

“Alright, pay up,” Clay says, bringing their drinks on a tray to the bench where the group is seated.

“You keep all the money from our Metaverse runs, though,” Nick points out, snatching a smoothie from the tray and slurping it down.

“Barbaric,” Gina mumbles, sipping from the straw.

Nick nearly chokes on his smoothie and Eret cackles. George grins, glancing at Clay and patting the empty seat next to him. Clay settles down, unsuccessfully stifling a laugh.

“How’d you like the...” Nick pauses, searching for the right words. “The trip so far?”

“Helen Park’s nice in the mornings and evenings. Afternoon’s way too hot,” Eret says.

“I came here before,” Gina says. “Before the...before the whole incident happened. It’s changed a

lot.”

“Yeah, time does that to places,” Clay agrees.

“Mom used to teach me how to bike here.” Gina falls silent, a strange expression on her face. She sighs, shaking her head. “That’s in the past now.”

Nick clears her throat. “There aren’t that many people here, so are you alright? Here, that is.”

“Huh?” Gina nods, ducking her head. “I’m fine.”

“Would you come here again?” Eret asks.

“If either you or George can come with me.”

“What about me?” Clay pouts.

Gina furrows her brows. “I guess you can too if you want...” She stares down at her smoothie and sips at the straw.

Ouch. George he understands, but why does *Eret* get preferential treatment?

Gina's face lights up, as if she's just remembered something and turns to Eret. “What’s your name, by the way?”

*

8/22 – SATURDAY – EVENING

Clay flops down on his bed, utterly exhausted. They had managed to entertain Gina for one whole day. Returning to George’s house after the trip to Helen Park, she demanded to challenge them to a battle of...drumroll please...Mario Kart.

Gina is a gaming beast, and Clay isn’t sure he can ever prove otherwise. He got pretty close, but Gina takes the cup every single time. She and Nick did end up as Mario Kart rivals of some sort, electricity crackling between them whenever either of them so much as overtaken the other. Eret is actually decent at the game, while Clay and George usually come in dead last.

Needless to say, Clay is, he repeats, utterly exhausted.

Maybe he should just...read a couple of pages of Zorro the Outlaw and get some shut eye. Yeah that sounds excellent, considering that he has another outing with Gina tomorrow...

To the aquarium. In Gina's words, a "higher-level dungeon".

*

8/23 – SUNDAY – DAYTIME

“There are so many people...” Gina jolts, stopping just in time as a child runs from one exhibit to the other. He begins pointing out the bioluminescent jellyfish swim freely in their enclosure, puffing out like giant balloons and floating along the water.

It’s a Sunday. What did Clay really expect?

“What are you doing?” Gina asks, tugging on Zak’s sleeve.

“Huh?” Zak blinks, looking up from his sketchbook. “I’m sketching.”

“*What* are you sketching?”

“Pufferfish,” Zak gestures to the tank he’s standing in front of. The pufferfish sure is tiny...and deflated. Deflated and harmless. Another fish that catches Clay’s eye is a black-coloured fish that meanders about the tank’s floor, body glued to the sand and hardly moving.

“Can I see?”

Clay glances over at another tank, at a beautiful display of corals and anemones. He’s seen this one before only recently, when he went with Phil and the others.

[“Feeling](#) left out?” George claps a hand on Clay’s shoulder, taking him by surprise.

“What? No,” Clay says. “Whatever makes you think that?”

George shrugs. “Gina gets along surprisingly well with the rest, huh?”

“For some reason.”

“She still seems shy around you.”

Clay hums.

“Oh, and, uh...” George looks uncomfortable for a second, turning to look at the tank, hand tense around Clay’s shoulder. “Back in the Metaverse, when you said that you ‘could kiss’ me...”

Fucking hell. Nick heard it. Naturally, being the navigator with an all-seeing Persona, George would have heard it too.

“It was just a slip of the tongue, right?”

Why did he have to bring it up now of all times?

“I...It was...” Clay gulps.

“Just kidding,” George says, a waver in his chuckle. “I knew you were joking.”

Clay doesn’t know whether to correct him or remain silent. George’s Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows, hand gingerly removed, arm falling back to his side. Is it just Clay or does George look...sad?

A flash in the corner of his eye has Clay turning around to find Gina rolling up to them, Zak beside her.

[“We](#) were going to leave you behind,” Zak says, sketchpad tucked under his arm. He glances from Clay to George and back to him. Clay shrinks under his penetrating gaze. “Am I interrupting something here?”

Gina says nothing.

“Absolutely not,” Clay says, shaking his head with a forced smile. “Come on, we’ve still got a lot of exhibits to go.”

Gina clings to Zak the entire day, letting him go only when she’s safely in her house. Thank

goodness Zak has adamantly turned down her offer to play Mario Kart or Super Smash Bros because Clay knows that it would only end like how it did with Nick.

Though it might not be a bad thing.

When Clay leaves though, promising that he would be back the next day to take Gina out to Elytra, he catches sight of Gina's questioning gaze from the door...

*

8/23 – SUNDAY – EVENING

“How's hanging out with Gina?” Floris asks from Clay's bed. He's migrated to Clay's pillow. *And* he's initiated a conversation. That's a good thing.

“Great,” Clay says, sighing. “God, I'm such an idiot.”

“You always are. What are you talking about?”

“Oh, you take that back,” Clay huffs. He climbs up to his bunk and lays on his stomach, deciding to scroll through social media. He raises a brow as he sees a familiar message from Tommy. He replies him quickly before plugging his phone in to charge.

“Who was that?”

“Tommy,” Clay says. Something must have happened with Punz, that's for sure.

“I see,” Floris says. He scoots to the side, allowing Clay more space. “Hey, I'm going to ask you a question, and you have to give me your honest opinion.”

“I'm candour personified.”

Floris blinks. “What does that even mean?”

“Nothing. Just carry on.”

Floris eyes him suspiciously but does as he's told. “Do you think I'm useless?”

“Useless? Well, no, considering you're our means of travelling around Mementos,” Clay says, clicking his tongue. “Oh, and you have some powerful healing spells.”

“So I'm not useless?”

“Yeah,” Clay says, turning onto his side. “You're an integral part of the team, Floris.”

What he sees when he meets Floris' eyes, however, is nothing but the germinating seeds of doubt.

Chapter End Notes

Fool arcana rank 3 -> 4 (Phantom Thieves)

Kindness +3 (read book)

Judgement arcana rank 2 -> 3 (Igor)

Fortune arcana rank 4 -> 5 (fundy)

Memories of a Summer Day

Chapter Summary

last day of training + beach trip

Chapter Notes

it's november already! HAPPY B'DAY GEORGE EVEN THOUGH YOU'LL PROLLY NEVER SEE THIS

To anyone who's taking their A levels starting tomorrow (or have any of their exams soon), GOOD LUCK!! Grades do not necessarily prove your worth! You have done all that you can to prepare for the exams so go in with your head held high. Keep an eye on the clock and choose questions smartly. Once more, good luck!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

8/24 – MONDAY – DAYTIME

“Oh you’re gonna lose so bad.”

“No I’m not. I’m the Ultimate Gamer! There’s no game I’m bad at!”

Clay, Darryl and George stand to the side, watching as Nick and Gina wield joysticks and coloured buttons, about to start two games of Donkey Kong simultaneously. The panel’s just a little high for Gina, but then again, she claimed that Nick needs a little handicap anyway.

The match was intense, but Nick loses by a hair’s breadth, with Gina cinching victory with a scream.

In two days. Two days of exposure is all it takes for Gina to really open up around them, even in places as loud as the arcade. She’s even tried to challenge Clay to a Pac-Man match, to which Clay lost terribly.

“Uh...Darryl, was it?” Gina asks. When Darryl gives an affirmative answer, she points to the Gun About machine, currently unoccupied. “I challenge you to that!”

“I’ll have you know I’m good at guns.” Technically, they all are.

“Really?” Gina says, raising a brow, and wheels herself over to the machine, Darryl following closely behind. “I’m gonna beat you at your own game, then.”

She ends the game with a score that’s even higher than what Clay’s ever seen, and that says a lot. Perhaps she and Tommy can be good friends. Darryl nearly drops the gun in defeat, and Clay pats his back in sympathy.

They continue exploring the arcade, and Clay finds out that if there’s one game Gina’s bad at, it’s

the claw machines.

“I don’t understand how you can be so good at everything else and suck at the claw machines,” Clay says. His claw closes around a Jack Frost doll, only for it to slip out of its grasp and drop back into the bed of dolls below.

“I’m just having a bad day,” Gina says, puffing her cheeks out.

“You weren’t having a bad day when you beat me at Gun About,” Darryl points out.

“Or Donkey Kong,” Nick says.

Gina pouts, and Clay has to stifle a laugh at how similar she looks to George. It must be a sibling thing.

“You’re doing really well, though,” Clay says. “The beach would probably be more crowded than this.”

“R-Really?” Gina glances around uncertainly. “Well, I’ve never...” She bites her lip. “I didn’t really notice...” It must have been the arcade games.

“I’m sure you’ll be fine,” Nick says, folding his arms. “There’s lots to do at the beach.”

“Yeah.” Gina nods. They exit the arcade, heading out once more into the waning sunlight. Come to think of it, they’re about to greet autumn soon. It’s almost the end of August, after all.

The group bids goodbye to Gina and George as they board their train, the long chain of carriages chugging off down the tracks.

“Gina’s a sweet girl,” Darryl says, a hand on his hip.

“Well, you should have seen her trashing me at Mario Kart the other day. She was *not* sweet.”

The trio continue their conversation even as they board the other train that had pulled up to the platform. He can hardly wait for tomorrow to come, to be honest. He’s got to look for the best route to the beach, stuff to do there, whether there are beach wheelchair rentals...

Daydreaming lasts only as long as the train ride to Valentine’s. They part ways with Darryl there, and Nick and Clay head on home.

*

8/24 – MONDAY – EVENING

“Do you want little shoes like these?” Clay says, gesturing to the tiny shoes for dogs for sale at their nearby pet store.

“What? No,” Floris huffs. “No way. I’m not some doll for you to dress up!”

“I mean, you would look really cute.”

“Stop!” Floris bats at the shoes Clay holds so threateningly towards him. “Stop it!”

“Joking, joking.” Clay laughs, placing the shoes back onto the rack. He grabs a couple bags of canine food and approaches the cashier. “You don’t have to be so uptight the whole time.”

“Well, I’m not the one getting treated like a *pet*!” Floris bristles. Clay pays for the food and carries the plastic bag and Floris out into the cold night.

“You’re coming with us to the beach, right?” Clay asks.

“Of course I am! What kind of question is that?”

“Just making sure,” Clay says, shrugging. “I mean, you might not like the beach...”

“Well, I’ve never gone to one before,” Floris says. “It never hurts to give it a try...”

“I’m sure you’ll like it,” Clay says. “There’s sand, water...” He scrunches up his nose. “People.”

“Ugh, people.” He sniffs at the air, taking in a whiff of the aroma of bread. “What do you do at the beach anyway?”

“We used to go to the sea once or twice during the holidays,” Clay says. “My little sister and I used to have sandcastle-building competitions. She was always a sore loser, so after the first few times I just let her win.”

“You have a little sister too?”

“Yeah,” Clay says, staring up at the moon. It’s half-full, shining bright amongst the clusters of stars in the sky. He wonders how she’s doing now. He hasn’t received any messages from her ever since his banishment to the city. He can only conclude that it must be the work of their parents.

“I hope she’s doing well,” Floris says.

Clay nods. “Anyway, we’d better get some rest for tonight. Tomorrow’s gonna be a big day.”

“A day at the beach, huh? I wonder whether there’s any yummy seafood there...”

“Foxes can eat seafood?”

“I’m a human! Not a fox! I can eat seafood!” Floris cries, then mumbles, “I think.”

“We’ll find out the truth when we reach the depths of Mementos, right?” Clay says. “Now that more and more people are starting to believe in us, we can go further into Mementos, right?”

“That’s right,” Floris says, having perked up a little. “I’m definitely human. Whatever we find at the bottom’s going to be proof of that.”

*

8/25 – TUESDAY – DAYTIME

“It’s the beach!”

Nick and Zak are the first to cannonball into the water, water splashing high into the sky. George pushes Gina over to the shoreline, the wheels scratching along the sand. He stops right at the edge, letting the waves barely touch her feet.

“M-Move me back! Move me back! Hurry!” Gina whacks at George blindly, socking him across the cheek. George chuckles and wheels her back a little, away from the water.

“Why don’t you try getting in the water?” Zak asks. “The wheelchair can come in, right?”

“It’s scary,” Gina whines, shrieking when Nick hurls a splash of water at her. She drags a hand across her face and swiping the water away.

“Hey, don’t be mea-“ Darryl begins to reprimand them when Gina glares at him. She holds out her hand.

“Give me that.”

“What? This?” Darryl hands over the giant water gun that looks absolutely brand new.

Gina points at Nick and Zak with mischievous grins on their faces.

“Take me there so I can beat them up.”

George bows mockingly. “As you wish.”

Darryl flinches when the siblings begin to launch an all-out war on Nick and Zak. Eret has laid out a picnic mat on the ground and placed all their belongings on it. Clay scoffs. He almost looks like a mother hen with all those bags dangling from his arms and shoulders.

“Are you not going into the water?” Eret asks.

Clay snaps his gaze from George’s mighty *fine* back. He’s not the buff kind of muscular, but the lean sort. He never knew that he’d get the chance to ever see George’s naked back after that aquarium incident, but...wow...

That is, until Eret decided to interrupt his ogling.

“I should,” Clay says, watching as Gina pulls out a massive water gun courtesy of Darryl, screaming and laughing as she sprays Nick and Zak all over. He holds out a hand to Darryl. “The other gun.”

“No!” Darryl holds it to his chest like a prized possession. “I only have two!”

“I have a beach ball. Would you like that?” Eret asks, retrieving the most hideous inflatable ball that Clay has ever seen in his life. Eret lobs it over to him, the ball landing in Clay’s arms.

“Thanks.”

Playing in the water is undoubtedly fun – Gina, George and Clay totally owned the other team comprising of Nick, Eret and Zak. Darryl and Floris sit under the beach umbrella fortunately provided by Eret while watching them battle it out under the scorching sun.

Time passes when you’re having fun, they say; lunchtime rolls around quickly. Stepping out onto the burning sand is impossible without their slippers. Clay hops like a cat on hot coal, eager to get back to the mat to relieve the agony wrought upon him by the sand all while Gina sprays him in the back with her water gun.

Darryl has baked a couple of muffins just last night, chocolate chip and banana-flavoured, ready to share.

“You didn’t get to play in the water,” Nick says.

“I’m fine just sitting here. Floris is good company,” Darryl says. Floris sticks his tongue out triumphantly.

“Muffins!” Clay can almost see Gina’s mouth watering. “Can I have some?”

“Of course.”

“I want the chocolate chip one!” Floris paws at Darryl’s box.

“Can foxes even eat chocolate?”

“I don’t think that matters,” Floris says, chips on his whiskers. “I’m not actually a fox, after all.”

“That’s true,” Clay says, crumbs dropping onto his shirt.

Gina giggles.

“What’s so funny?” Nick asks.

“You sound like you’re actually holding a conversation with your fox,” Gina says. She makes a grab for Floris’, gathering him up into her arms. Floris settles into her lap, sighing contentedly as she runs a hand through his fur.

“He’s so expressive it’s like speaking with a person,” Eret says, reaching over and patting Floris’ head.

“Hey!”

Zak has slunk away and returned so fast Clay didn’t even realize that he was gone. In his hands, however, are...

“What the fuck are you doing with those?” Nick cries.

“Language!”

Zak has, in his hands, two wonderfully crimson scorpions...no, *lobsters*. There are many things just plain *wrong* with this scene, but what’s most concerning is the fact that the lobsters are still moving. Wriggling their pincers about, legs scuttling in mid-air...

“I had to use up the last of my allowance to buy these, but they’re going to make for a great muse. I can feel it,” Zak says proudly.

“That’s kinda cool,” Gina says. “Can I see them?”

“What? No!” Zak looks somewhat offended. “They’re the greatest specimens of their kind!”

“I think they look delicious,” Gina says. “I wanna eat them.”

“Maybe I’ll just boil them after I finish drawing them,” Zak says. “I can bring them over to your place.”

“That sounds great,” George says. “I wouldn’t mind some boiled lobsters-“

“Unfortunately, there are only two,” Gina says snidely. “Sorry.”

The group laughs. There is a sort of magic being around friends. Friends whom you’ve gone through so much together with. Friends that won’t abandon you no matter what.

Soon, the evening sun is upon them, the dwindling sunlight casting a golden hue on the sands. The

evening scene is considerably quieter, the sea breeze welcoming after a sweltering day, the salty tang wrapping around them like a stole.

Clay finds himself helping with the packing up, wiping down Darryl's guns of sand and water. Eret folds the umbrella and ties it up.

"It's so pretty."

Clay turns his head to find the rest of the group staring at the sun dipping below the horizon. The gentle lap of the waves like music to their ears, a fitting soundtrack to the end of their eventful day.

"It is, isn't it?" Darryl says, a knee drawn up to his chest.

"If it wasn't for you guys..." Gina drops her gaze to the rush of water, as if teasing with their foamy fingers. "I'd probably never have seen this ever again."

"But the fact remains that you have," Nick says.

"You're strong, Gina," Eret says, placing the beach umbrella down beside the rolled-up mat.

"You're the one who reached out to us, after all. I'd think that speaks volumes."

"Thanks," Gina says with a light giggle. "I really wanted to thank you all, you know, for letting me come out again...I feel like I'm a whole new person after that change of heart thing. So, I was thinking..."

She falls silent, fidgeting with the hem of her bermudas. "I want to ask to join the Phantom Thieves."

"You what?" George splutters. "No. I refuse to let you, Gina."

"Why not? What do you guys even do?" Gina asks, frustration in her tone. "I know you change hearts, but...I don't even know how you do it."

"And it's better that you don't," George says sternly. "What we do is really dangerous."

"Then maybe I can help with the tech stuff!" Gina says. "From the way you would have just let Medjed walk all over you, none of you have any experience with hacking or coding, right?"

Nick coughs.

"Yeah, so maybe I can't do all those running around and jumping stuff, but at least I can help on the side of machines and code," Gina says. She gazes over at Clay, eyes begging. "I can be really useful to you guys."

"It's not a question of whether-" George starts, only for Clay to hold up a hand.

"I think it's something Gina has to decide for herself," Clay says. "And it wouldn't be *too* dangerous if she's going to stay out of the Metaverse."

"The Metaverse?"

George shoots her a look, and Gina remains dutifully quiet. He looks from her to Clay and back to Gina again.

"I have to agree with Clay here," Eret says.

George purses his lips. He opens his mouth to say something, then stops and sighs. “As long as you *promise* to keep out of trouble and stay off the frontlines.”

[Gina](#) gives a little whoop, pumping her fists into the air. The sudden burst of energy radiates off her in waves, like an aura that Clay can sense. The sun continues to sink further beneath the ocean, and the group decides that it’s time to leave.

With Gina’s wide arsenal of technological know-how, the Phantom Thieves will be more capable than ever before.

Given that both George and Gina are aware of their Phantom Thief activities, it would be wise to arrange it such that their hideout is now their place of residence. It would be easier for Gina as well.

They part ways at Valentine Hills’ train station, bidding each other a good, restful night.

*

Chapter End Notes

Fortune arcana rank 5 -> 6 (fundy)

The End of the Holidays

Chapter Summary

the end of the holidays are coming up!

Chapter Notes

school is going to start up again and more s links will be available :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

8/26 – WEDNESDAY – DAYTIME

“There’s no way you can guess what happened, big man.”

“What?” Clay asks, licking at the melting ice cream on the side of his cone. Tommy appears especially chipper today, biting into his pistachio popsicle.

“Punz turned himself in.”

“Punz what?” Clay didn’t think that he would go to that extreme.

“He turned himself in,” Tommy says. “It was so sudden. Oh, and as for Manifold, he’s actually still alive. Just confined somewhere so I wouldn’t know. The body I found wasn’t his.”

“Then why did you think it was?”

“Because I received a message from Punz telling me it was,” Tommy says. “Now that I think about it, it was kinda stupid of me to just believe him like that.”

“Nah, it wasn’t stupid,” Clay says. “It just means you’ve got a good heart.”

Tommy groans. “Stop it with all that sentimental bullshit. It’s disgusting.”

Clay laughs, wiping a smear of ice cream from his mouth. “So, you can live worry-free now. No more mafia, no more illegal activities.”

“Very pogchamp,” Tommy agrees.

It’s very hard to believe Punz’s Shadow when he told them that Tommy has had seen – and possibly caused – so much death. Maybe this is his way of coping with his past.

“What’s going to happen to Manifold now?”

“He’s leaving,” Tommy says. “I think the Family’s in a lot of trouble since their boss just permanently resigned, so a lot of them are taking the chance to leave.”

Clay hums. “Who’s in charge of the mafia now that Punz has turned himself in?”

Tommy shrugs. “Dunno. To be honest with you, I don’t want to think about it.”

“Fair enough.”

They sit in silence for a while, watching as bunches of people pass them by, going about their daily business. Clay finishes up his ice cream and pops the last bit of the cone into his mouth.

Tommy glances at the time. “I’ve got to meet up with Manifold now. He’s got no house now so I’m seeing whether he can come live with us.” Tommy puts his phone back into his pocket and salutes Clay. “Thanks for the ice cream, big man.”

“No problem,” Clay says, waving as Tommy runs off, headed for the train station.

It’s almost time for him to go as well. He has another appointment with another associate, of course.

*

8/26 – WEDNESDAY – EVENING

“Okay, I’ve got a couple of new targets for you today,” Yao Yi says, pushing her phone towards Clay. “For starters, there’s this manager who’s been stealing money from the register and blaming it on his employees.”

“We’ll look into that.”

“And there’s a scary one. Turns out, there’s an assassin who disguises himself as a homeless man,” Yao Yi says.

“Hmm.”

“Yeah,” Yao Yi screenshots the information and sends it to Clay. His phone pings. “Oh, by the way, I’ve added a new feature to the Phan-Site.”

A new feature?

“It’s a poll sort of thing,” Yao Yi says. “Basically, the public gets to nominate and vote for whoever’s heart they want you to change. Then you can decide whether or not to change them.”

A poll, huh? Clay accesses the Phan-Site. Sure enough, a new page has been added to the website, featuring several names already. The top of the list for now, with twenty per cent of the votes happens to be a man called Andre Lee.

“Who’s that?” Clay asks.

“Oh, right. He’s the president of Lee Foods who’s in charge of the Big Bang Burger chain.”

Speaking of the Big Bang Burger, Clay hasn’t had it in forever. The fantastical challenge, that is.

“Do you know why people are voting for him?”

“I did a little research,” Yao Yi says, frowning. “Turns out he’s been mistreating his employees. Underpaying them, mainly. But also because of unethical practices behind the scenes...I don’t know any more than that, though.”

“I see.” Clay nods. Hopefully, Gina should be able to do something about it in the future if they

have to. A new target may top the list sometime later. “It’s helpful. Thanks, Cheng.”

Yao Yi brightens up, her smile equalling a million lightbulbs.

Their food arrives then, and they eat up. Of course, Yao Yi still talks incessantly about how cool the Thieves are and how glad she’s that *she*’s the one helping with their requests board and all that jazz.

By the end of their meal, Clay feels like they’ve gotten a little closer...

*

8/27 – THURSDAY – DAYTIME

“I wanted to see the Mauve Beach Guardian in the flesh at least once before I pass on...” Clay reads off the note stuck to the board in the back room of the church. It was written by a Raymond Fitzerberg. Ant waits patiently for him by the entrance, licking its paw.

“The Mauve Beach Guardian?” The only “Guardian” that Clay has heard off is that humongous fish he and George managed to catch back at that tiny fishing pond at Valleyberth.

Ant mewls. He struts out of the church and waits by the entrance, as if beckoning Clay to follow. Clay does, stuffing the note into his pocket, keeping up with Ant as Ant makes its way down the sidewalk, past several houses. He finally stops at a quaint house atop a hill. Sprinklers water their freshly-mowed lawn. A persimmon tree stands in the middle of it, birds singing on their branches.

“The person who wrote this stays here?”

Ant purrs in response.

What a smart cat. Well, it seems that what Clay needs to do is to catch this Mauve Beach Guardian and show it to whoever stays here. Judging by the wording of the request, it seems that they must be pretty old.

It doesn’t sound like a simple task at all. The last time he caught the Valleyberth Guardian he needed George’s help to even pull it to shore. Plus, he doesn’t even have his own fishing rod.

Right. It’s time to get to work.

*

Mauve Beach is not very different from when Clay last went there which was, to be honest, just the day before. Many people, the sands dotted with colourful umbrellas and mats. Away from the shore, near the jetty stretching out towards the lighthouse, however, is quiet and peaceful. There’s practically nobody.

Ant hops out from Clay’s bag as Clay prepares his newly-acquired fishing rod and bait and tackle. He remembered how George did it when they went to that fishing pond so he shouldn’t run into too much of a difficulty.

Without someone to talk to or something to do, fishing is a terrible bore. Clay finds himself staring into space at the wide, open sea. He watches waves roll against the surface of the water and the sturdy legs of the jetty covered in rough barnacles. Seagulls soar overhead on massive wingspans, riding the winds as they come and go.

The only fish that Clay's been catching are small fry, tiny fish swimming about in an equally tiny pail. The sun beats down overhead, though it is not as bright and scorching as Clay expected it to be. Ant is fast asleep beside him, body curled into itself, nose tucked into the crook of its foreleg.

Luckily Clay has packed lunch for himself and Ant, having foreseen that it would probably take him the whole day to even get the Guardian on the hook. Ant decides that it would like to explore the beach on a full stomach, so it sets off for the sands.

The minute Clay sits down, however, thunder rumbles from the clouds above. Lightning forks across the sky, a split-second warning before torrential rain begins to pour from the skies like a gigantic waterfall.

At that instant, Clay's rod jerks. He's caught something! Something radically different from what he's been catching the past few hours. He can feel it rattling his bones as he grasps the rod, reel seat quickly slippery from the rain. Lord, Clay wishes he has packed a raincoat or poncho.

Clay begins to reel the fish in, its vicious shadowy form barely visible from beneath the choppy water. He pulls with all his might, planting his heels into the grooves of the jetty, mustering every ounce of strength to yank the fish back at him, letting the reel go ever so slightly whenever he feels the line is about to snap.

Then, beside the fish's form, Clay notices something even more alarming.

Someone is flailing about in the water, arms outstretched, head barely bobbing above the surface. Clay glances around. There is no one around – almost everyone has left since the storm hit.

In a flash, the waves recede far enough for the drowning person – a young girl – to wash up on the shore, and Clay knows he has to act fast. Abandoning his post, he sprints towards the girl who is spluttering and coughing. A critter nudges at her calves, encouraging her to stand.

“Are you alright?” Clay grabs her wrist and pulls her to her feet. He cannot afford to be gentle now, not when the harbour wave could come at any moment. He drags her along the beach, running as fast as their situation can possibly allow, Ant already darting ahead of them.

They just barely make it to civilization, to the train station, when the harbour wave strikes. It's not that big, but it's big enough to cascade down the whole shore. Clay watches as the wave recedes once more, giving way to calmer waves.

It's only then that Clay realizes that he's still holding on to the girl's hand. He releases her, mumbling several apologies. She thanks him briefly and squirms back through the crowd in search of her parents.

The nudge of a wet nose against his ankle has Clay tilting his head down to find Ant soaked to the bone, fur dripping with water, with a curious look on its face. He reaches down and picks Ant up. There's nothing he can use to dry the cat with, considering that he's conveniently left everything that is not his phone and wallet back at the jetty, which must have also fallen victim to the sea.

“I paid good money for that rod too.” Clay sighs. Ant purrs in mourning. Looks like he's not going to be able to fish up that Beach Guardian today. Still, he could probably go back to the jetty and take a look around. Perhaps recover what remains.

The rain has stopped by the time Clay returns to the jetty. Upon stepping over, wooden floorboards creaking beneath his heels, his attention zeroes in on what must be the biggest, most shiny fish that he has ever seen, flopping about helplessly on the jetty. It has a magical sheen to it, a prism of

colours radiating off its shimmering body. That thing must be as long as Clay is tall, and with that size, it must weigh a tonne. Could this be the Beach Guardian that Clay heard about?

Well, for starters, there's no way he's going to drag that thing back to Jule Halls. He has no idea what Fitzerberg's number is either. Dammit. He should have thought this through before he embarked on this hopeless journey.

"Is that...?"

A voice from behind Clay startles him, and he turns around to find an elderly man hobbling up to him, a stick in hand.

"It is!" the man quickens his pace, passing Clay by and standing over the lifeless body of the giant fish. He turns to Clay. "Did you fish this up, young man?"

Clay blinks. "Uh, no. It was the tsunami..."

The man laughs. "I see, I see. I never thought I'd be able to see this fish in my lifetime..."

[The cogs](#) in Clay's brain clicks into place. This man...could he be...? "Are you Mr Fitzerberg?"

The man's eyes widen. "How did you--"

"You wrote your wish on the Jule Halls church's note board, right?" Clay says, tucking his hands into his pockets. "You wanted to see the Beach Guardian at least once before..." He trails off, letting the sentence complete itself.

"Well, that is true," Fitzerberg murmurs. "I must thank you, young man, for allowing me to fulfil my final wish."

"It really wasn't..."

"Well, you were trying to fish the Guardian, weren't you?" Fitzerberg says with a mischievous chuckle. "That's why you're here, aren't you? Well, I have to thank you for the effort, at least, and perhaps wasting your day on an old man like me." He shakes his head. "I never did think anyone would have read my note, not since Velvet passed on."

"Velvet?"

"That's what he called himself," Fitzerberg says, shrugging. "Velvet was a lovely boy who ran the wish board at the church before it closed down. He was very close with the Devil, unfortunately."

"The Devil?"

"The cat that lived at the church," Fitzerberg says. "Wherever that cat goes, disaster follows. Almost everyone believed that it was an omen of bad luck, that misfortune is ingrained in its spirit."

The cat...Clay glances down at his feet, finding Ant curled up around his ankles, as if using his body as a shield. What could be the story behind this nickname? The man thanks Clay once again, and Clay heads back towards the train station. He did not manage to find his bag or things, but none of those were really important anyway.

It's just that Ant has to sit on his lap the whole way home. It's tucked snugly against Clay's stomach as Clay finds an empty bench on the train, plopping down on the cushiony seats, entire

body aching and sore. That was way more tiring than any Metaverse run ever. Still, they've managed to fulfil one request today. Ant must be more satisfied now too. Clay shuts his eyes, head leaned back against the window as the train chugs along, its droning a lullaby to his ears.

*

8/27 – THURSDAY – EVENING

<Phoenix SC> you would not guess what just happened today

<Dream> what?

<Phoenix SC> my ex-wife and her boyfriend confessed to their crime

<Phoenix SC> could this be the work of the phantom thieves?

<Dream> it could be

<Dream> you posted a request on the Phan-Site, right?

<Phoenix SC> yes I did

<Phoenix SC> so they are real

<Phoenix SC> and they chose to help someone like me

<Dream> that's just what they do

<Dream> they're vigilantes who help those who can't seek help for themselves

<Phoenix SC> I see

<Phoenix SC> I still have to thank you though.

<Phoenix SC> if not for you giving me that push, I don't think I would have ever considered asking them for help

<Dream> Don't mention it

<Dream> How is your daughter doing?

<Phoenix SC> she's sleeping soundly already

<Phoenix SC> I've yet to really sit down and have a talk with her

<Phoenix SC> I hope I can do it asap

<Dream> im sure you can

<Phoenix SC> thanks man for sticking by us through this

<Phoenix SC> I guess I'll get going now

<Phoenix SC> I may not log on as frequently anymore

<Dream> it's alright

<Dream> I understand

<Phoenix SC> thank you. I hope I can repay you back one day

<Phoenix SC> I guess I'll be logging off now

<Phoenix SC> see you next time

Clay logs off that night feeling oddly satisfied. Even though Phoenix SC doesn't know exactly what had transpired, or who Clay really is, but at least he and his daughter seem to be doing well now. He puts his laptop away on the shelf, plugging it in to charge. Maybe he should follow the news a little closely...a case like this is bound to show up somewhere...

*

Chapter End Notes

Death arcana rank 7 -> 8 (tommy)

Moon arcana rank 7 -> 8 (yao yi)

Devil arcana rank 3 -> 4 (AntF.)

Proficiency +3 (fishing)

Guts +3 (fishing for beach guardian)

Hermit arcana rank 6 -> 7 (phoenix sc)

Mugging Session

Chapter Summary

just some story stuff + s links

Chapter Notes

ooh we moving into september already (in the fic lol)

anyone who knows anything about coding and com sci pls dont be too triggered by this chap pls suspension of disbelief for the sake of the story

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

8/28 – FRIDAY – DAYTIME

“Why are we here?”

Zak shrugs. “Dunno. Just wanted to come see this place a bit.”

The two of them are standing outside what used to be Zak’s old house, the rundown manor along Lancer Lane. Clay cannot quite see the house without seeing the museum as well, the towering building reeking of vanity, of greed, housing stolen hopes and dreams.

“Wanna go on in?” Clay asks.

Zak walks up to the door and jiggles the knob. Nope, it’s locked. Shut tight.

“Lemme handle this,” Clay says. He reaches for a lockpick and a tension wrench and makes short work of the lock. The door springs open and a musty smell greets them.

Zak enters first, stepping into the house that no one has lived in for such a long time. Almost abandoned, but not quite. Zak heads up the stairs, stepping to the sides where the boards aren’t so creaky. Clay follows his lead, down a corridor and into the room where Darryl had offered to pose for him. Nostalgia brings a smile to his face.

Some of Zak’s art materials remain. The multitude of easels are folded up and are leaning against a wall. Several canvasses line the walls, holding within a painting that Clay cannot hope to understand.

“It’s weird just...standing here,” Zak says. “I used to stay here for a long time too. And Master, she’ll...” He shakes his head. “Why am I still calling her Master?”

He looks like he’s in a state of loss, staring out the window. “She fucked all her students over, but it feels so weird calling her by name. What the fuck is wrong with me?”

“It’s not easy to forget all that she’s done for you,” Clay says. “You *have* been living with her for

most of your life.”

“But what she did to my mother and everyone else...”

“But she still cared for you, in a sense. Maybe at one point she even came to see you as her own son.”

“Even if she indirectly killed my mother.”

Clay shrugs. “The human heart is complicated. I mean, even if we know that some people did do something bad, it’s hard to just cut off our feelings for them.”

Zak laughs, slapping Clay’s shoulder. “Dude, I did not expect something so profound from you.”

“What is *that* supposed to mean?”

“But I agree,” Zak says. “I mean, she still gave me food and shelter and stuff. Encouraged me to take on art...I worked my ass off for her then, and now when I think back to what that guy said...” He stomps the ground. Clay flinches. “It makes me so mad!”

“So...”

[“I’m](#) gonna show him,” Zak says. “I’m definitely going to show him true art!”

Clay smiles. That’s the Zak he knows. All he needed was the motivation which is exactly what this house holds for him.

“I’m gonna ask for more details and shit,” Zak says. “With that Rossi guy. But y’know...” He scratches his head, digging for that business card from his hoodie pocket. “It’s a little daunting to go alone.”

Clay raises a brow.

“Don’t make me say it, man.”

“Just send me the place and time,” Clay says with a chuckle. He glances out the window. “Come on, it’s almost dark. I think it’s time to get home.”

*

[8/28 – FRIDAY – EVENING](#)

“That movie sucked,” Nick says, leaning back against his chair as his computer boots up.

“You can say that again,” Clay mumbles, yawning. He actually fell asleep halfway through.

“Oh crap!” Nick shouts suddenly. Clay flips onto his belly, peeking over the railings of the bed to glance over at Nick.

“What’s wrong?” Floris asks.

“Have you...” Nick starts, focus obviously elsewhere. He digs through his schoolbag, fumbling about for his books and worksheets and....oh. Something seems to click in Clay’s brain.

“I’ll do it tomorrow,” Clay says, defeat in his tone. It’s too late for this shit.

“I’ve got a grand idea,” Nick says. “Let’s call the others over for a study session. We should have it over at George’s house.”

“Gina’s just going to distract you with Mario Kart.”

“You think too lowly of me.”

Clay scoffs. He knows *he* will get distracted by Gina pestering them to play Mario Kart or Smash Bros or something but a homework date sounds fun.

Nick: People who have not finished hols homework

Zak: I thought you’d never ask

Zak: I need to collect at least 10 things that mean remembrance to me

Zak: pls help

Me: the woes of an art student

Darryl: I could help with enderlands homework

Zak: :(

Nick: Saviour Darryl pls

Nick: I beg u

George: I’m just left with that history writeup

George: though history isn’t my strong suit

George: im not looking forward to it

Gina: George sucks at history, math and bio

George: what

Me: ok guys lets meet up tmr at george’s place

Gina: okie

George: I don’t mind. The table should be big enough

Zak: great

Eret: I can make it too

Darryl: see u!

Nick: ^-^

Well then.

“Oh, and there’re some Phantom Thief stuff that I need to tell you guys about,” Clay says. “New Mementos targets and the Phan-Site.”

“The poll thing, right? I saw it,” Nick says. “Do you think we should pick our next target based on that?”

“Maybe,” Clay muses. Nick logs onto his account on his game and puts on his headphones. Meanwhile, Clay slumps back into bed, almost hitting a warm body next to his pillow.

“Hey, watch it.” Floris tucks his tail flush against his body.

“Sorry.”

Well then. Clay puts his panic over his homework to the back of his mind. The only piece of homework he’s completed is Literature and that’s because Wilbur forced him to. He’s left with Math, Bio, Physics, Chemistry...literally everything under the sun.

A sinking feeling tells him that one day will not be enough to complete it all.

*

8/29 – SATURDAY – DAYTIME

Clay sighs. Even with Darryl and Eret’s patient teaching, he still has absolutely no idea what this graph is supposed to tell him. He glances up at the clock – the minute hand has barely moved while the second hand ticks away, oblivious to his suffering.

“Oi, focus,” Floris says, whacking Clay’s cheek with his tail.

Clay sucks in a deep breath and sighs.

“I’d rather be fighting Shadows...” Nick mumbles.

“Same here,” George groans, squeezing out some correction fluid on his foolscap paper and blowing on it.

“Oh, stop complaining,” Darryl says, pointing out a word on Nick’s essay. “You spelled that wrong.”

Nick blinks. “Ah.”

“Thank goodness I’m not in school,” Gina says with a grin. “What you’re studying seems really boring.”

“It *is*,” Zak agrees. “I’m lucky I’m not in their school. Still, I need five more things that mean ‘remembrance’ to me.”

“What does that even mean?” Floris mumbles.

“You know what? Let’s take a break,” Eret says, putting his phone down on the table. He’s been scrolling through social media ever since he’s got here, looking up only when Clay, Nick or George asked him a question. The smartass. He probably finished his homework since the start of the holidays.

“Thank you,” Clay says, dropping his pen onto the table and leaning back against his seat dramatically.

“Oh, you said you had some Phantom Thief stuff to tell us,” Floris says. “Well? Spill.”

“Right.” Clay digs out the screenshots that Yao Yi has sent him and places his phone on the table. “Okay, so first up, we have this guy who’s been stealing money from the register and blaming it on his employees.”

“That sounds fucked up.”

“Language,” Darryl hisses, glaring at Nick.

“I’m all for it,” George says. The rest of the Thieves agree.

“Great. So, the second one would be this guy who happens to be an assassin who disguises himself as a homeless man,” Clay says.

“I think we should take him on,” Floris says. “I mean, he’s killing people.”

“I agree,” Eret says. There are no objections from everyone else.

“So you guys actually get together to discuss these kinds of things?” Gina asks. “Like, whose heart you should change?”

“Yeah,” Floris says. “It’s our policy. If even one person doesn’t agree, we can’t go through with it.”

“And you fight monsters? Like in anime?”

“Well.” Clay glances from one Thief to the other. “Something like that.”

“Man, that’s cool,” Gina says, eyes practically sparkling. “I’ve always wondered how you change hearts. Oh, right! About that poll on the Phan-Site, I saw Andre Lee’s name pretty high up.”

“The president of Lee Foods,” Eret says. “I’ve heard he’s engaged in some underhanded tactics to get ahead of the competition.”

“Someone’s also mentioned before that he’s been mistreating his employees,” Clay says. “Doesn’t pay them minimum wage.”

“Fires them for no reason, doesn’t give them rest breaks or any type of leave ever,” George finishes. He coughs. “I’ve heard a lot of rumours about him.”

“He sounds like a suitable target,” Clay mumbles. “Gina, could you find out more about him?”

“Andre Lee? No problem,” Gina says, saluting him. She turns to George. “Gogy, stairs.”

[“Gogy?”](#) Darryl laughs. “She calls you Gogy?”

George flushes.

“Don’t push it.” He gets up and follows Gina over to the staircase, grabbing her crutches leaning by the wall. Darryl picks up his phone, deciding to order takeaway.

“What do you guys want? I’m ordering from Pizza Hut.”

“Chicken Supreme.”

“Barbeque beef.”

“What pizzas are there?” Zak asks, leaning over Darryl’s shoulder.

Clay closes his eyes, letting exhaustion wash over him. He’ll just take a well-earned break before the pizzas arrive.

Gina does not join them for lunch, claiming that she has important work to do. They devour their pizzas with voracious appetites, not leaving even a single scrap of meat remain.

Clay finishes his last line just as the sun begins its descent, breathing out a shaky sigh of relief. He can't believe he's actually completed it. That pile of homework the size of Mount Everest! It may have taken a toll on his spirit, but at least he won't be on the receiving end of any teacher's ire this year.

[“So, what’s the plan now? We waiting for Gina to finish her research?”](#) Nick asks, on his phone.

“Yeah,” Clay says. “When school reopens, we’ve got to stay on our toes, since the police are coming to investigate.”

“If I receive any more details, I’ll let you guys know,” Eret says. “For now, we should lay low and not draw attention to ourselves. At least, until the investigation is over.”

The team agrees unanimously and they pack up, headed for home. George walks them to the station and they head their separate ways.

*

[8/29 – SATURDAY – EVENING](#)

“School’s reopening.”

Clay nods. The hot bath’s nice, especially for a chilly night like tonight. It definitely feels better when someone else is paying for you. Somehow, Blade is rich enough to arrange for a private bath, away from the rambunctious screeching Clay heard when he first walked into this respectable establishment.

“It is.”

“You don’t seem too happy about it,” Blade says, sounding amused. Clay shoots him a look.

“What kind of student would be happy about school reopening?”

“I can’t fault you there,” Blade says. “I’ve just got to be prepared for more staring.”

“Why?”

“I’m a celebrity, apparently.” Blade leans back against the wall as steam puffs up around them. “A celebrity that opposes the Phantom Thieves, to be exact.”

“Hmm. Have you ever considered changing your stance?”

“Absolutely not.”

Clay pouts. Blade laughs at that.

“You look like a child.”

“What? No,” Clay scoffs. “I do *not*.”

“You’re like a child who cannot understand why people don’t share the same interests as them.”

“Okay, that’s just insulting,” Clay says, splashing water at Blade, who lets out the most monotone yelp Clay’s ever heard. Blade retaliates with an infantile splash in Clay’s general direction.

“Is it pressurizing, though?” Clay asks. “The stares and everything.”

“It’s...I’ve gotten used to it,” Blade says. “But it’s tiring. All people want to see is their idea of me, so I’ve got to keep putting up that front.”

“You don’t have to conform to what people think, though.”

Blade snorts. “Not to brag, but when your name is this big, peer pressure’s a massive motivation.”

They fall silent.

“How goes the investigation? Gotten any closer to finding out who the Phantom Thieves really are?”

Blade shakes his head. “We couldn’t find anything. Not even after that whole Medjed incident. No calling card this time.”

“Maybe because there isn’t actually a change of heart.”

“You sound like you know them pretty well.”

Did Clay dig his own grave there? “Medjed isn’t a single person. It’s a whole organization.”

“So they must have had some kind of skilled hacker on their side,” Blade says. “Someone good with computers.”

Well...yes.

“Considering that they never made a move for close to a month after Medjed made that announcement, it could mean that the Phantom Thieves did not have someone who specialized in coding, and had only come across such a person only recently.”

Clay forces his breathing to stay even. “That sounds about right.”

“Still, what makes less sense is why Medjed chose to stick to their declared date,” Blade says.

“They could have attacked this city at any time but didn’t. It almost makes me think that this whole threat was set up for nothing more than theatrics.”

Theatrics?

“Well,” Blade says, rising from the water. “It’s getting late. I wouldn’t imagine that someone like you would stay out for so long.”

“Don’t underestimate me. I’m a total bad boy.”

Blade barks out a laugh. “Hell would freeze over if you were.”

“So, did you find anything?”

The group is gathered at George’s house again, in Gina’s room this time. Clay peeks over her shoulder at the sheer number of unintelligible string of numbers and letters and punctuation symbols.

“Nothing,” Gina says, slumping back into her chair. “It seems like he’s really protected...for some reason.”

“Really protected? By who? The government?” Nick folds his arms, sounding annoyed.

“Well, yeah. You’re right on the money, actually,” Gina says. “Their security is hella tight too.”

“No wonder he’s been getting away with all these unethical behaviours,” Darryl says. “His has ties to the government.”

“Maybe if I have some info from an inside source...” Gina mumbles. “Hey, anyone you know in the force?”

“The force?” Zak asks.

“Police. Hopefully someone who’s high-ranking” Gina says. “The police are controlled by the government, right? It’s more likely that someone’s parent is a detective or a lawyer than a politician.”

Nick and Clay exchange glances.

“Nick, your mother is...” Eret starts.

Nick purses his lips. “I’m not stealing data from my mom.”

Gina continues to type nonstop. “Your mom’s a detective?”

“Prosecutor,” Nick says, clearing his throat.

“Here,” Gina says, rummaging through her drawers and fishing out a small, black USB drive. “There’s a code inside that can bypass any firewalls they would have put up and can extract the data on its own. You just need to plug it into her laptop.”

“Weren’t you listening?” Nick stares at the USB drive.

“But this is the fastest way to learn about our new target,” Gina says, waving the USB stick in front of his face.

“But...”

“If you can’t do it, I will,” Clay says, taking the USB stick from Gina. “You could distract her and I’ll do the actual deed.”

“You make it sound like a crime,” George says.

“Because it *is* a crime,” Nick cries. “How can you be so on board with this?”

“That’s not the only thing,” Gina says. “You see, I think there was something fishy about Medjed.”

“Fishy?” Floris asks. Eret repeats his question.

“You see, Medjed’s supposed to be this mammoth hacking company, right? They break through corporations’ data protection and steal their info. But you see, when I was trying to get rid of Medjed, their code was a little...it was sloppy. There’s no way people in that company would be able to write something so bad.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Zak asks.

“That’s what I wanna know too.”

Eret touches his chin absently, as if in deep thought. He turns to Clay. “Are you going to do it?”

“If Nick won’t.”

“Oh, you can be assured that I won’t,” Nick says, sighing and running a hand through his hair. “But I can distract them for you.”

“Great,” Clay says, pocketing the USB. “Then it’s settled. We’ll let you know when we’ve gotten the data. Sometimes Nick’s mom doesn’t come back for days.”

“But today’s Sunday,” George points out.

“She works through Sunday too,” Nick says. “She’s really chasing that promotion.”

“Like I said, we’ll let you know again,” Clay says. “For now, I say we focus on our newest Mementos targets.”

“And we should settle them before the school trip,” Darryl adds. “When’s everyone free?”

“Tomorrow,” Nick says. “To be honest, I can do every day.”

“Sorry, I’m visiting Adrian tomorrow,” Darryl says. “I don’t have any other plans in the foreseeable future, though.”

“I’ve got something on tomorrow as well,” George says.

“How about the day after? On the first day of school?” Floris asks.

“Dude, Mementos on the first day of school?” Zak looks affronted. “You actually want to kill us, don’t you?”

Floris lets out a half-hearted laugh.

“Wednesday,” Clay says. “We’ll go in on Wednesday. Is that fine for everyone?”

Everyone is in unanimous agreement. Till the agreed day, they will be responsible for upgrading their weapons and armour and Clay is tasked with restocking their medicine.

“Oh, by the way,” Zak says, “how did you know that you could take down Medjed? I mean, what if you couldn’t?”

“I knew I could,” Gina says. “Because I was the original Medjed.”

“You were *what*?” Darryl’s eyes bulge from their sockets. Gina turns back to her computer as if she didn’t just reveal the most shocking fact about herself.

George laughs breathily, ruffling her hair. “She’s a real devil, isn’t she?”

“Are you serious?” Eret asks, impressed.

“I’m glad she’s on our side,” Nick says with a dramatic fist to the heart.

There are some people in the world that Clay learns not to ever mess with.

When he leaves that day, his pocket dips heavily with the weight of the USB drive. The very feel of it sends a spark of adrenaline through his veins. He’s survived death traps, he’s had so many close calls he can barely count. Plugging in a USB drive will be a piece of cake compared to his stunts.

He will return with the promised data.

*

8/30 – SUNDAY – EVENING

“What is that?” Caroline points to a glass tank. Or rather, the manta ray plastered on its surface.

“Stingray.”

“Then what about that one?”

“Angelfish. And uh, Nemo.”

“Nemo? You humans have such weird names for these creatures,” Caroline says, practically smashing her face against the glass panel.

“Caroline, come take a look,” Justine calls, pulling on her sleeve.

“What? Can’t you see I’m looking at a Nemo right now?” Despite her harsh tone and words, Caroline peels her face from the panel and lets herself be dragged over to the petting pool. Starfish line the floor and sides of the pool while tiny stingrays glide around gracefully.

“We can touch them?” Caroline reaches out to poke at a starfish.

“It seems that way,” Justine says. “Inmate, for the sake of your rehabilitation...”

She doesn’t even need to finish her sentence for Clay to walk over and attempt to pet the stingray, dipping his hand beneath the cool water. The stingray sidles up to him, almost like a puppy, its body rolling with the waves of the water.

“So? How does it feel like?” Caroline asks.

“You wanna try?” Clay withdraws his hand, wiping it on his pants.

Caroline bites her lip. “No thank you. I’m not the one who needs rehabilitation.” She reaches out to poke at another starfish.

“I can hold your hand.”

Caroline harrumphs and turns away like a petulant child. Justine chuckles.

They reach the end of the aquarium just in time to catch the penguin feeding show. A few other

families and couples are gathered, watching as the keeper ventures into the frigid enclosure with a bucket of fish. The stars of the show, the emperor penguins, waddle over, some poking their heads up through the water.

Needless to say, the twins are enthralled.

“I wonder what our Master would say if we suggested implementing an aquarium of our very own in the Velvet Room,” Justine says.

There are literally sparkles in Caroline’s eyes. “I want the stars and...the...” She glances at Clay, who tilts his head in question. “Stars and...the Nemo.”

“I want the stars as well,” Justine agrees. “We shall head back and make the request immediately.” She turns to Clay. “Thank you for bringing us out to see the aquarium, inmate.”

“Makes me wonder why people keep other animals in tanks and stuff,” Caroline says. “They’re as trapped as you are.”

Clay clicks his tongue. “People are fascinated by them.”

“That would make sense,” Justine says, glancing back at the emperor penguin enclosure, at the preening penguins, with a frown. “However, it still is saddening. The animals born here will never be able to experience the freedom of the wilderness. They are inmates of their own cells.”

“Well, maybe they need to undergo rehabilitation too,” Caroline says, folding her arms. She points her baton at Clay. “You’ve completed another task. I think you’re doing really well, for an inmate.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Justine squints at her clipboard. “You are halfway there, inmate. I look forward you seeing your subsequent progress.”

“Now, escort us back to the Velvet Room!” Caroline says, whipping her baton out. “Pronto!”

Chapter End Notes

Star arcana rank 5 -> 6 (Skeppy)

Guts +5 (watched movie)

Priestess arcana rank 5 -> 6 (Technoblade)

Aeon arcana rank 4 -> 5 (justine and caroline)

School Begins

Chapter Summary

school starts up again.

Chapter Notes

hehe i'm seeing interesting theories in the comments section ! i wonder how many of u (including silent readers <3) have guessed the traitor...

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

8/31 – MONDAY – DAYTIME

“Mom would be back tonight,” Nick says, chugging down a bottle of Mountain Dew as they start up the next level of Super Mario Odyssey. It's pouring outside, as if the thundery showers signal the end of their holidays.

“What about your dad?”

“I’ve got a plan,” Nick says, shrugging.

“What plan?” Floris asks.

“Movie night,” Nick says. “That will be your chance to get to her laptop.”

Clay nods. The stage boots up, and Clay assumes control of Cappy this time.

Tomorrow will be the start of a new chapter in his double life as a student and a Phantom Thief. That is, if he can get a hold of the data that Mrs Armstrong holds within her files.

Thousands of scenarios run through his head. Mrs Armstrong could very well refuse Nick’s offer, considering her fixation on that promotion. However, Mr Armstrong’s presence could change that. There are so many things that could happen, and only in one of those thousand scenarios would Clay win.

The only thing he can do now is to wait for night to arrive...

*

8/31 – MONDAY – EVENING

“A movie night?” Mrs Armstrong gives Nick an incredulous expression. “Nick, I have a ton of work to-“

“You’ve been working nonstop,” Mr Armstrong points out as he slices a piece of chicken with utmost finesse. “I think it’s time you took a break, dear.”

“Yeah,” Nick says. “It’s the last day of the holidays and we haven’t spent any time together.”

Clay remains dutifully silent as he scarfs down his chicken, wiping at the lemon sauce at the edge of his mouth.

Mrs Armstrong glances from Nick to Mr Armstrong, then over to Clay. She sighs. “Well, I suppose you’ve got a point. Just this once, alright? After I’ve captured the Phantom Thieves, we can arrange for more...time together.”

Captured the Phantom Thieves...She’s still hot on their tail, it seems.

They decide on watching something on Netflix in the end. Mr Armstrong and Nick return from the kitchen with a packet of chips. Ant stalks over and curls up on Nick’s lap as Clay moves to dim the lights.

Clay moves to sit beside Nick on the ground, where it is easiest to slip away in the cover of the darkness.

The plan has been set into motion. It is Nick who chooses the movie – Escape Room – and Clay sits back, absently running his fingers over the faint shape of the USB drive in his pocket as the movie starts up, camera falling on a man smoking a cigarette.

It’s around the halfway mark, when the survivors have reached the next room, that Clay declares that he needs to use the bathroom. No one even so much as bats an eyelash as Clay stands, slinking about the house as silent as possible.

Floris is waiting for him outside his and Nick’s shared room, tail swishing. “Come on.”

Clay meets Floris in the middle, standing right outside Mrs Armstrong’s office. He gingerly nudges the door open, hinges creaking. Clay flinches, listening out for any sound, but all that he hears is the screams of terror from the television.

“Hurry.” Floris squeezes through the tiny crack between the door and the doorjamb, Clay following straight after.

The office is dark. The only sliver of light filtering through the lone window. This is the first time Clay’s ever been here, now that he thinks about it. The place is impeccably neat. No file is out of place, no stacks of paper waiting to be settled.

The perfect picture of responsibility and diligence. Mrs Armstrong’s laptop is placed smack in the middle of her desk, plugged into the socket. Clay flips the lid open and is met with a generic lock screen – a beautiful image of the Maldives - demanding the password. He grabs the USB drive from his pocket and stabs at the side of the laptop, doing a small victory dance when it slides in without a hitch.

As if on cue, the password screen disappears and Clay is in. His heart is in his throat. He swallows uncomfortably as he watches a pop-up window appear. Files are being transferred. That’s quick.

Floris is still quiet. Clay glances behind him. He knows he’s told everyone that he’d do it, because he’s, apparently, their fearless leader. However, nothing could have quite prepared him for the unmatched speed of his pounding heart, the sudden heightening of his senses. His eyes are on the loading bar, on the tiny icons depicting the transfer of documents.

Come on...come on...

Clay jumps at a booming crash from the living room. He throws a quick look behind his back. There's no one at the door. Floris is still keeping a lookout, his back to him. Clay's head snaps back to the laptop screen when he hears a ding. Another window appears, informing him that the transfer is complete.

Clay quickly ejects the USB stick and shoves it into his pocket. He shuts the lid of the laptop and leaves the room as quietly as possible, taking care to close the door with the softest click that he can manage. The USB stick is safe in his pocket, seemingly weightier by several pounds.

Floris heads back to the room, and Clay returns to his seat beside Nick. There are significantly fewer survivors now, and Clay arrives just in time to catch a fistfight between the main character and this other guy that had showed up. He's got the information they need, and Mr and Mrs Armstrong are none the wiser.

Now, all he's got to do, as Clay watches the credits begin to roll, is to get this USB stick to Gina.

*

9/1 – TUESDAY – MORNING

"Please get your parents or guardian to sign this circular," Mr Calvin says. "This is regarding your trip to Hawaii on the seventh of September."

Upon hearing the announcement, the class bursts into an uproar, excitable students talking over each other. Clay is doodling in his notebook little flowers and rainbows and-

He nearly jumps out of his skin when the class representative walks by, delivering the circular onto his desk. He thanks her, a hand still on his chest to calm his startled heart and stares at the circular in front of him.

School trip to Hawaii to learn more about the Hawaiian culture. Well, that is not usually the case for a school trip.

"You *are* going, right?" Darryl asks, turning around in his seat.

"Yeah, of course," Clay says. "Everyone's going, I think."

"I'm not," George says from behind them. Clay whirls around, as if he's heard the most terrible news of his life, before realization dawns on him. "Gina needs me."

"Right," Clay mumbles. He hopes he doesn't sound too disappointed.

"I'm sure you'll have fun," George says with a chuckle. "The rest of them would be going...well, except Zak."

"And me," Floris says. "I don't think this is somewhere I can sneak off with you guys to."

"You could stowaway in our luggage," Darryl says.

"Nope, definitely not," Floris says, sticking his snout into the air. "I'm not going to compress myself like some kind of...of *object*."

"The option's always open," Clay says with a cheeky wink. Mr Calvin moves on to other announcements, about the upcoming police investigation into the Phantom Thieves at this very school. Clay tucks a lock of hair behind his ear. No doubt this investigation is led by Mrs

Armstrong, given her vested interest in this case and her ever-increasing desperation.

The investigation would begin tomorrow. Students will be called out to answer a couple of questions posed by the lead detectives.

“Just answer them as quickly and accurately as you can. Don’t say things that could taint the school’s reputation,” Mr Calvin says. “Is that clear?”

The topic of chatter amongst the students has almost immediately shifted to that of the Phantom Thieves and their heroism when they stood up to Medjed. The Phantom Thieves had won, they said. Whose heart are they going to change next, they ask.

Probably Andre Lee, at the rate they are going. Homeroom ends just then, and Clay stands up, preparing to head for his next class.

*

9/1 – TUESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“Here’s the data.”

“Thanks,” Gina says, grabbing the USB drive from Clay’s hands. Then, she perks up, grabbing at Clay’s phone and wrenching it from his grasp. “Oh my God! The latest model!”

“It’s not, actually,” Clay says, clearing his throat. He’s much too broke for that in the past, and he’s never really thought about changing his phone recently. “It just looks like it.”

“Oh.” Gina droops visibly. She holds it up to him. “Help me get in.”

“What? Why?”

“So I can take a look at all its features, of course. No one uses this model anymore.”

Clay isn’t sure what to feel about that. There’s no harm in that, is there? He sighs, unlocking his phone and handing it over to her, helping her plug in the USB stick into the port while she fiddles with his device.

“Okay,” she says, handing it back to him. “Plain. Nothing much. You play Genshin Impact?”

“You got a problem with that?”

“Course not. I play it too.”

“Huh.”

Gina turns back to her computer and opens up the files that Clay has transferred onto the drive. “I heard you guys are going to Hawaii.”

“We are,” Clay says. “Shame that George can’t join us.”

“Because of me, right?”

“Well, if he leaves, then you...” Clay starts.

“I can handle myself,” Gina says, puffing out her cheeks. “Seriously, he should just go.”

“I’m not going.”

George appears at the door, in his hands a tray of tea and scones. He sets it down on the table. “I’m not going, Gina. We’ve had this talk.”

“But...”

“No ‘but’s,” George says. “Come on, have some snacks. You too, Clay.”

Clay reaches for a scone, careful not to get jam on his fingers. Gina munches down on one while she waits for the files to transfer to her own laptop. Once it’s done, she unplugs the USB drive and shoves it back into her drawer.

“It’s gonna take me a really long while to analyse this,” Gina says. “In the meantime, you can go and enjoy some alone time with my brother.”

George splutters. “What are you trying to say?”

“Nothing,” Gina singsongs as she turns back to her computer. “Then again, you could just go home first. Believe me when I say it’s going to take a while.”

They bask in silence, the only sounds the clicking of the keyboard as Gina’s fingers fly over them, code appearing fluidly across her screen. Clay finishes up his scone and sips at his tea.

“How was it?” George asks.

“It’s good,” Clay says. “Did you bake them?”

“Huh? Of course not,” George says, amused. “I bought them from the bakery.”

“George can’t bake for shit.”

“That’s true,” George says. “I can’t bake. I can only cook basic foods.”

“And even those taste bland.”

“Hey. At least we’re saving money.”

Gina nods. “That’s true.”

Clay glances at the clock. “I think I have to go now. I need to meet with someone else.”

“Who? A secret girlfriend?” George asks teasingly.

“Do I look like I’ve got the time for a secret girlfriend?”

“A secret boyfriend, then,” Gina says. Clay shoots her a look. “What? Come on, with the googly eyes you’re always making at-“

“S-Stop it right there!” Clay physically restrains himself from diving at Gina and slapping a hand over her mouth. He wants to wipe that knowing smirk off her lips. George glances from one to the other.

“Wait, I wanna know,” George says quickly. “Hey, tell me!”

“Nah. I’m not gonna betray Clay,” Gina says. “The person he likes is seriously pretty stupid.”

“Did you hack his phone?”

Gina rolls her eyes. “No. You go work it out yourself, brother.”

Clay gulps down his tea and clears his throat. “Okay, if you don’t mind, I’m just going to leave now. Thanks for the food, George.”

“It’s no problem,” George says, waving as Clay ambles down the stairs and leaves the maisonette, headed for Helen Park.

*

9/1 – TUESDAY – EVENING

“Thank you for meeting me all the way out here, Clay.”

“It’s fine,” Clay says. He and Dr Montgomery are seated on a bench overlooking the quiet lake. Clay finds himself enjoying the tranquillity, punctuated only by the occasional chirrup of birds in the canopies.

“It’s peaceful here, isn’t it?” Dr Montgomery sighs. “It’s healing for the soul.”

Clay hums in agreement.

“Oh, that’s right. I have cookies for you today,” Dr Montgomery says. She reaches into her handbag and picks out a tiny tin box. She opens the lid. Within are several cookies in similar packaging, but on closer inspection, there appears to be an odd one out.

Clay decides to pick that one.

“What made you choose that cookie?” Dr Montgomery asks, placing the box back into her handbag.

“It’s...” Clay frowns. He isn’t sure how to explain it. It just had a certain...draw. He rips the packet open and takes a small bite.

“Because it was the only one of its kind in there, wasn’t it?” Dr Montgomery says, smiling. “Well, it’s what most people would choose, I would believe. It puts into practice the law of scarcity.”

“The law of scarcity?”

“People are more interested in items that there are fewer of,” Dr Montgomery says. “Case in point: people are much more interested in what companies claim to be ‘limited edition’ merchandise.”

“I mean...that sounds about right,” Clay says, nodding.

Dr Montgomery giggles. “Such fascinating occurrences are none other than the work of human nature.” She leans forward, propping her elbows on her knees, gazing out at the still surface of the lake. “You see, in response to scarcity, people would inadvertently experience a change in their desires, which would cause a change in cognition...”

Clay shifts in his seat. He’s a little confused, but, well, maybe he’ll understand it later. “This effect would spread to their other senses and thus lead to a subjective, observable difference in their reality. We are no different, of course.”

“So what you’re saying is that people’s perceptions can be changed by their cognitions or

preconceptions?”

“Yes!” Dr Montgomery looks elated, as if about to jump up and down like an excited child. “It’s all in the subconscious, but isn’t it very interesting?”

“It is.”

“Now how do you feel about that cookie?” Dr Montgomery asks. “Its taste could have been altered by your subconscious.”

Clay squints at the cookie in his hand. “My senses lied to me.”

“Perhaps,” Dr Montgomery says. “The cookie’s taste has not changed objectively, but because of your subconscious, it may taste more delicious than it actually is.” She holds up a finger. “And this has got me thinking.”

“Hmm? Thinking about what?”

“About the human heart, and how unreliable it could be. This experiment shows that with even just a sprinkle of preconception, it is possible to bring someone much joy, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Well...”

“Imagine if you ate that cookie and it was the best cookie of your life. Say I never revealed the trick behind it,” Dr Montgomery says. “Wouldn’t that have been a subjective truth of your reality?”

“Truth?” Clay shoves the last bit of cookie into his mouth. “I wouldn’t say it would be truth, per se...”

“Well, it wouldn’t be truth. Just what you perceive in your subconscious,” Dr Montgomery says. She leans back against the bench. “I was thinking: what if this idea of preconception could be studied further? And then applied to help other people?”

“It could work...in theory.”

“In theory, yes,” Dr Montgomery says, nodding. “We won’t know until we try. But if we think about its raw power, I’d say it can even help more than just regular counselling. Naturally, many people would see it as a lie, or ignoring their problems, but even if that’s true, we could be helping a lot of people.”

“That’s very admirable of you,” Clay says. “It’s just...I think you always seem to be trying to find new ways to help others. Even people whom you don’t know.” The ultimate form of altruism, perhaps.

“Thank you,” Dr Montgomery says, her smile warm. “Still, we wound up getting into an academic discussion after all, didn’t we?”

“It was fun. I learned a lot.”

“Really now?” Dr Montgomery fishes something out of her bag: a packet of gummy bears. “Here’s something for your contributions, Clay. It’s really helping me move my research along. I’m sure I can hit a breakthrough very soon.”

Clay thanks her for the packet of gummy bears – it looks like something Gina would love – and stands to leave. Dr Montgomery returns the thanks and waves as Clay heads back to the train

station, making for home.

*

Chapter End Notes

Councillor arcana rank 3 -> 4 (Montgomery)

School Blues

Chapter Summary

the thieves are investigated + mementos + s links

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

9/2 – WEDNESDAY – AFTERNOON

“Clay and Darryl, please head down to the principal’s office,” Mr Calvin says upon the return of two of their classmates.

“Two of us?” Clay looks up at the announcement.

Darryl shrugs. “They’ve been doing it that way the whole time.”

“Really?” *Not* daydreaming was never one of Clay’s stronger points.

“Remember not to say anything stupid,” Floris hisses.

He and Darryl leave the classroom and head down to the first floor, to the imposing office standing near the entrance.

The glass door swings open. An officer greets them at the door and splits the two of them up, leading Clay over to a conference room and Darryl to another. Two other officers are already seated inside, each with several documents in front of them.

“Please, take a seat.”

Clay sits down. Don’t say anything stupid, Floris had said. Don’t say anything that will endanger the lives of the team. Clay steels himself.

“We have heard that you have had an altercation with Peter Krones earlier in the year,” one of the officers says. “Is this true?”

Clay bites his lip. “Yes.”

“I see. Do you think the Phantom Thieves are from this school?”

“I...Probably,” Clay says. “The whole incident started with Mr Krones’ change of heart.”

“I see.” The second officer is busy typing away, eyes trained on his computer screen.

“Is there anything else you’d like to add?” the first officer asks. “To the, ah, investigation? Anything that could help pinpoint the identities of the Thieves.”

“No. I have nothing to add.”

“Alright then,” the first officer says, clapping his hands. “You are free to go.”

That's it? Clay isn't exactly sure what they could have learned from those two questions. He stands stiffly and thanks them, turning and heading for the door.

Darryl is waiting for him outside, looking up when he emerges. He and Clay quickly exit the office.

"What'd they ask you?"

"Whether I had an argument with Krones and whether I thought the Phantom Thieves are students of this school."

Darryl frowns. "What did you say?"

"Well, I didn't lie. Come on, they can't possibly guess from such vague questions and answers."

Darryl looks unconvinced. They ascend the stairs to the second floor, chatting about Darryl's questions and his answers – nothing that could give them away, Clay thinks. Then again, the ones leading this investigation is Mrs Armstrong and possibly Blade.

Mr Calvin is still in the middle of scrawling the solution to an integration question across the board when they return. Clay hurries to his seat as George and Yao Yi are next called to the office.

"How'd it go?" Floris asks, voice heavy with sleep.

"It went alright."

"You didn't say anything revealing?"

"Never."

Floris shuts his eyes and resumes his nap. Meanwhile, Clay continues to doodle and daydream, mind clearly elsewhere...

*

9/2 – WEDNESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

"A new area has opened up," Navi says, a holographic map appearing in front of him.

"Must be because we changed Gina's heart and defeated Medjed," Fundy says. "People are starting to believe in us more."

"Probably," Dream says, hands behind his head. "Navi, do you know where the targets are?"

"The targets? They're in the new area," Navi says. "Pretty deep down, though."

"Alright then," Clay says, as Fundy transforms into the Fundybus. "Lets get a move on."

*

"Is it just me or are the enemies getting stronger?" Sapnap asks as the Fundybus trundles down a deserted path.

"Each new place is getting creepier too," Dream points out. The walls are now tinged with green, viridian veins pulsing even more frantically. The shrieks and screams they have been dismissing as howls of the wind are getting louder and louder.

They approach a bend and Dream instinctively throws his hand out against the wall, stabilizing himself as Eret does one of those sharp turns of his.

“There’s the platform,” Navi says. “The target should be in the next area.”

The chained door opens when they approach. Dream and the others hop out of the Fundybus and are headed for the next level.

“What did the investigators ask you guys?” Sapnap asks.

“Generic questions,” Navi says, shrugging. “You didn’t say anything that could give us away, did you?”

“Of course not. What kind of person do you think I am?”

“A careless one,” Eret says, jumping into Fundy’s driver seat. The other Thieves clamber in and the Fundybus is off.

“Yeah, I can see Sapnap somehow leaking information,” Bad says, earning chuckles from everyone else and Sapnap’s glare. George opens his map up and directs them to the void where the target is hiding. Eret stomps on the accelerator and the Fundybus bursts forward, wheels screeching against the train tracks as he barrels into the swirling void.

*

9/2 – WEDNESDAY – EVENING

<Phoenix SC> it seems that soon I can get full custody

<Phoenix SC> of my daughter

<Dream> congrats!

<Phoenix SC> the circulating pictures have been investigated

<Phoenix SC> it still pains me that not every one of them could be recovered...

<Dream> your daughter wouldn’t have to live under your ex-wife’s thumb anymore

<Phoenix SC> yes, that is true

<Phoenix SC> i will keep u updated

<Phoenix SC> it’s the least I can do for someone who has listened to me and provided advice

<Dream> thank you !

<Dream> it was still you who took the initiative to speak with her

<Dream> I hope you can continue to support her in her time of need!

<Phoenix SC> thanks :)

<Phoenix SC> alright then, I guess we can move on to our next lesson on crafting

Clay goes to sleep that night with the newfound knowledge of crafting unbreakable lockpicks. Well, he certainly does want to see a happy ending for Phoenix SC’s family. He shuts his laptop

down and lays down on the pillow. Floris is missing again, having migrated once more to the other side of the bed.

Clay shifts onto his side, careful not to kick him, as he wraps himself in a blanket burrito and closes his eyes.

*

9/3 – THURSDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“You look happy.”

“Yes, of course I’m happy to be able to come back to this club,” Niki says with a smile, watering can in hand. “It’s refreshing, you know.”

“Yeah, it is.”

Clay moves to put his bag down where he normally does, beside Niki’s, and heads on over to help with the planting of the new crops and flowers. Carrots and poppies seem to be Niki’s choice of plants this time round.

“Derek hasn’t tried to contact you, right?”

“No,” Niki says, sounding a little startled. “I’m surprised you’d have remembered that.”

“Yeah, well...he’s hard to forget,” Clay says, scratching his head. Guess the change of heart really worked.

“There’s no need to worry about me. I’m fine. Really,” Niki says, humming as she heads over to retrieve the seedlings for the poppies.

If that is so...why is there a bruise on her forehead? She’s barely able to cover it up with her bangs, a pool of blue-black peeking out from beneath her locks. He doesn’t particularly want to bring it up now. Not when she’s smiling and preparing the pots and planting the seeds and...

“Do you mind getting me that trowel?”

“This one?” Clay walks over to her with the requested tool.

“Yeah. Oh, do you mind tending to the pumpkins?”

“The pumpkins?”

“For Halloween. I started planting them at the start of August,” Niki says. “I think they can be harvested in October.”

The pumpkins weren’t there from before the holidays. She must have brought them in when school started.

Niki puts on some music – a couple of pop songs that Clay has been hearing a lot recently – and they work in silence. Time flies by and evening falls before Clay knows it.

“Do you want to get some dinner?” he asks.

Niki glances at her phone with a small gasp. “Oh, it’s already so late!” She drops her gaze, shaking her head. “I’m sorry, my mother is expecting me home for dinner.”

“That’s too bad. Maybe next time?”

A ghost of uncertainty flickers across her expression. Niki forces a smile, nodding. She grabs her bag and leaves Clay with the key, rushing off first with hurried footsteps. Clay slings his bag over his shoulder and proceeds to lock up, heading down to the principal’s office, keys jangling in his hand.

*

9/3 – THURSDAY – EVENING

“This is the beach, huh?” Caroline says, staying a safe distance from the water, refusing to get off the boardwalk to even touch the sand.

Justine treads near the water, waves lapping at the shore, at the soles of her feet. She turns back to Caroline. “You should come over here, Caroline.”

“And get my feet dirty? Nope.”

“Are you afraid of the water?”

Caroline puffs her cheeks out, as if ready to rebut Justine’s taunt, but she simply huffs and turns away, preferring to stick to the boardwalk that leads out to the ocean.

A seagull squawks overhead, battling the currents of the wind. Justine goes further out into the water, fascinated by the way the water swirls around her ankles, clumps of seaweed floating around her. Caroline, meanwhile, whoops when she finds a crab. The strange creatures she encountered at the aquarium, she calls it. However, her cheers quickly turn into shrieks when the crab snaps its pincers at her.

“Why do people choose to come to the beach, inmate?” Justine asks, glancing around at several people basking in the sun. “It seems to hold no purpose.”

“Yeah, it’s all just sand and water,” Caroline says from the boardwalk, her hair tousled by the wind.

“It’s for us to relax,” Clay says. “People can’t keep on working forever, you know. We need time to unwind too.”

“And people come to the beach for that? To places with these...these scary things?” Caroline hops away from an approaching crab, which, Clay notes, is hardly any bigger than his pinkie. Still, their pincers can be terrifying no matter the size.

“I must admit it’s somewhat rejuvenating,” Justine says, face turned to greet the wind.

Caroline hums. There is a moment of comfortable silence as the three gaze out into the sea. The surface of the water rolls with the breeze, ships out at sea making a statement with their blaring horns. A lighthouse stands nearby, a strong beam of light shining far into the distance.

Caroline sneezes.

“Do you want to go back now?” Clay asks. “The beach gets cold at night.”

“I think it’s for the best,” Justine says, smiling as she strikes off something on her clipboard. Upon doing so, however, she doubles over, a hand on her head. Clay catches her immediately by the

shoulders.

“Are you okay?”

Caroline is by her side in seconds, having leapt off the boardwalk onto the sand. “Oi, Justine!”

Justine recovers quickly, straightening her posture and staring down at the sand, confusion on her face. She glances down at her clipboard, scrutinizing the words.

“I have attempted to recall who wrote this, but alas, my efforts prove useless,” Justine murmurs. “It could not have been Master, yet it is neither Caroline nor myself. How could this list have come into existence? And how could it have come into my possession?”

“Well, I don’t think we need to think too much about it,” Caroline says, folding her arms. She purses her lips. “But I’ve had a few dizzy spells recently too.”

What is this all supposed to mean? Clay hasn’t got a single clue.

“Well, I think that it is time for us to leave,” Justine says. “I’m feeling rather...fatigued.”

“Same here,” Caroline says. She stabs her baton in Clay’s direction. “Now escort us back, inmate.”

*

9/4 – FRIDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“Ah, are you...?” Clay starts.

Darryl has brought a friend to school. A friend on crutches that Clay recognizes all too well.

“This is Adrian,” Darryl says. “I don’t think you guys have officially met.”

Clay shakes his head. “No, we haven’t. Nice to meet you, Adrian.”

“Nice to meet you too,” Adrian returns. He’s certainly looking much better from what Clay remembers. His face has more colour to it, his cheeks fuller. Less worry in his eyes.

As per Darryl’s request, Clay stays by their side, helping Adrian when he needs to as they ascend to the rooftop. Clay remembers this place all too well. The same place where they used to hold their first Phantom Thieves’ meetings, back when it was still him, Nick, Floris and Darryl.

It is also the place where Adrian jumped.

Darryl pushes the door open and Adrian heads on through, panting. The climb must have taken a lot out of him.

“Why did you want to come here?” Darryl asks.

“Just wanted to...well...” Adrian looks past the green wire fence keeping the students from certain death. “Just for nostalgia’s sake?”

“Nostalgia?”

“That and...I’m...moving away soon,” Adrian says with a sad smile. “I wanted to come up here one last time. So that I wouldn’t...I wouldn’t leave with any regrets. I want to come up to the rooftop again and show myself that I’m stronger than I was the last time I was here.”

“Wait, you’re moving away already?” Darryl asks, jaw dropping. Adrian nods.

“Yeah,” Adrian says. “I think the sooner the better. Having that kind of record, that kind of reputation here...all the horrible memories...I mean, I know Krones is gone, but...” He sighs.

“The memories will always remain,” Darryl finishes sadly.

Adrian returns to staring out past the green fence, at the campus buildings below and the other towering establishments around them. “Promise me you’ll take care of yourself, Darryl.”

“Of course I will. You have to take care of yourself too.” The crack in Darryl’s voice is unmistakable.

Clay leans with his back against the wall at the stair landing, the door just slightly ajar. It felt wrong being there, like he was intruding on their privacy. He tilts his head back till it hits the wall.

“I promise. Stop crying or I’m going to start crying too.”

Two voices burst out in watery laughter. Clay smiles. Adrian is working hard to achieve his happy ending, despite the trials and tribulations thrown at him. Adrian’s strength has been an inspiration to Darryl, bestowing upon him the motivation to become even stronger, to become a friend worthy of him.

Adrian thanks Clay for helping him up and down from the roof. Darryl apologizes for ditching him, of which Clay dismisses easily. Adrian’s mother comes to pick him up, and Darryl and Clay send him off.

“Adrian’s moving away soon,” Darryl says, watching as the red Jazz cruises down the side street, turning out into the main road.

“It’s for the best.”

“I know that,” Darryl says, clenching his fists, staring at the ground. “It’s for his own good...but why do I feel so...” He grits his teeth. “Why do I feel so...mad?”

“It’s natural,” Clay says. “You-“

“I’ve been a terrible friend. I mean, I couldn’t even help him when Krones...” Darryl shakes his head. “I’m mad at myself, Clay. The fact that I had been so weak then...”

“But you’re getting stronger,” Clay says. “When you and Adrian inevitably meet up in the future, you’re going to show him how strong you’ve gotten, right?”

“Yeah.” Darryl chuckles, wiping away a stray tear. “What the muffin...you weren’t supposed to see me like this.”

“Well, you still have us,” Clay says, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. “You’ll always have a place with the Phantom Thieves.”

Darryl nods, hiccupping as he buries his face in his hands. Clay moves to shield him from the curious gazes of the other students. He retrieves a packet of tissue from his bag and hands a piece to him, which Darryl accepts gratefully.

“Hey, you wanna get some sugar in your system? How about that cupcake place?”

Darryl’s eyes are tinged red, but it sparkles. Sparkles with a sort of determination and hope. There

is no need to worry about him. Darryl is already a very strong man.

*

Chapter End Notes

Hermit arcana rank 7 -> 8 (phoenix sc)

Proficiency +3 (crafting)

Hanged Man arcana rank 6 -> 7 (niki)

Kindness +3 (taking care of plants)

Aeon arcana rank 5 -> 6 (justine & caroline)

Lovers arcana rank 6 -> 7 (bbh)

Preparation for Hawaii

Chapter Summary

the title says it all

Chapter Notes

OMG I GOT THE BEST IDEA EVER FOR DREAMS CONFESSION SCENE can look forward to dnf content on 10/26

this chapter is quite rushed...dammit so much schoolwork

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

9/4 – FRIDAY – EVENING

“We’re going on a trip in our little rocket ship...” Nick sings as he begins rolling his clothes up to fit into his tiny luggage. Clay, on the other hand, has to go buy one this weekend, but it doesn’t stop him from joining in on the packing.

“Do you even have enough shirts to wear for Saturday and Sunday?”

“I have a whole closet,” Nick says proudly, throwing open the doors to his wardrobe to reveal the wide array of T-shirts, slacks, and even shoes. “Plus we’re only going for three days. How many clothes do you want to bring?”

Clay accesses the recommended packing list that the class representative had sent. It’s only one page long, but the words are small. So, shirts, pants, socks, slippers all checked. Swimming trunks/suits? Are they going to the beach?

“We have to go buy shampoo, body soap, facial soap...” Clay says. “We don’t have any travel-size ones.”

Nick notes it down in his phone. “What else do we need?”

“My luggage.”

“Other than that.”

“Uh...” Clay scans through the list once more. “A book.”

Nick looks up from his screen. “A book?”

“Else I’d have nothing to do on the plane.”

“Oh.”

Nick's luggage is pretty much packed with the essentials, minus what he would need to use over the weekend. Clay checks his phone for incoming messages from the Thieves...and some others.

Tommy: yo big D

Tommy: I got a school trip coming up so I won't be at the arcade

Tommy: im coming back on the 11

Why does Tommy have a much-longer trip than *they* do? The world is unfair.

Tubbo: hello clay! I will be a little busy with preparations for the competition this coming week!

Clay smiles. God, why is Tubbo so nice?

"Oi," Nick says, "Gina's done with the analysis shit."

"Huh." Clay taps on the group's chat log, scrolling through the onslaught of messages.

"Let's go and see her tomorrow," Floris says. "She could have some important info for us."

Me: can we come over tomorrow

Gina: sure

Eret: we're going to have to figure out the distortion and the venue as well now that we've got his full name

Me: so is everyone on board with this? Changing his heart?

Nick: hell yeah

Darryl: im ok

Zak: same

Gina: George says yeah

Me: alright then, let's meet up tomorrow at george's house

Me: also do u guys wanna come with me to buy a luggage

Darryl: you really leave things to the last minute, don't you?

Zak: yo same

Zak: as in I need a luggage too

Eret: where are you going, Zak?

Zak: Japan

Darryl: living my dream

Darryl: not you clay

Me: I KNOW

George: hope you guys have a safe trip ^-^

Clay can't help but grin like an idiot at that message. That tiny face is just...*so cute*. And George is so concerned for their safety...

Nick: clay's having a heart attack rn

Darryl: figured

Eret: that much was obvious

Me: Et tu, eret???

George: ?

Zak: whats happening

Nick: shhhh clays having a moment

George: with who??

Gina: someone's jealous

George: im NOT JEALOUS

Gina: I never said it was u

"Looks like someone reciprocates your feelings," Nick says smugly. "What're you gonna do?"

"What am I...? Uh..."

"You can confess during the school festival."

"Well..."

"Or Halloween. Go up to George in a spooky ghost costume. Or wrap yourself in toilet paper...or something."

"No," Clay says, shaking his head. "I don't know for sure that he likes me. And, uh, if he ends up rejecting me..." Then he would destroy the team's synergy. There's no way he can do that to the Thieves.

Especially not as the leader.

"Come on, it physically hurts watching you pine for him," Floris says.

"The feelings will fade eventually."

"That is, like, the single least positive thing you've said. Ever," Nick says. "And that's saying a lot."

Clay shrugs. The safety of the team is certainly above his own personal emotions. Moreover, George is their navigator whose every move can change the tide of their battles. Clay turns back to his bookshelf, trying to decide on a book to read...

Well, he certainly didn't notice Nick and Floris exchanging devious glances.

*

9/4 – FRIDAY – LATE NIGHT

“No! Please! Give me another chance!”

The principal of Enderlands slams a hand on his desk, sweat trickling profusely from his forehead. “I will capture the Phantom Thieves! I promise!”

He glares down at the letter of recommendation written for the president of the Student Council. What a useless president. Unable to even provide a single clue regarding the identity of the Thieves. This investigation is supposed to be *his* job, dammit.

“It’s the end of the road for you, Mr Patterson,” the man on the other end says. “Clearly, you have forgotten who gave you this position.”

“W-Wait! Director!”

The direction of the Special Investigations Unit disconnects the call, leaving only a swirling void of dread settling in the principal’s heart. He buries his face in his hands as tears begin to leak from his eyes.

*

9/5 – SATURDAY – DAYTIME

“Okay, so as it turns out, this Andre Lee guy’s involved with the government,” Gina says, pulling up a document found within Mrs Armstrong’s files. Was she investigating him as well? “And as we know he’s doing a lot of shitty stuff.”

“You know the poll on the Phan-Site? Well, the thing is, he’s winning by a lot,” Nick says, holding up his phone. It’s true. Andre Lee’s name has gotten about seventy per cent of the few million votes cast.

“If so many people are against him, they must have good reason,” Eret says.

“We should give them what they want,” George says. “Is that what you’re saying?”

“Okay, so Mr Lee’s gonna be our next target,” Gina says. “You guys said that we need to find out some distortion and venue or something, right? What’s that about?”

Clay carefully explains to her about how the Meta-Nav works, deliberately leaving out details about the Metaverse itself. The Meta-Nav did not appear on Gina’s phone, so at least she won’t accidentally find herself in the Metaverse.

“Well...I guess we could work on that when you guys are in Hawaii,” Gina says, humming. “George, you can be my legs.”

“It’s more likely to be someplace that Lee frequents, correct?” George says. “I’ll see what I can find.”

“We’ll get this done when you guys are in Hawaii, or Japan,” Floris says. “Just leave it to us.”

“But what will you do?” George asks. “Gina’s the one dealing with the computers and I’ll be the one running around the city...”

“Um...” Floris paws at the ground. “I can...”

“Floris can be our mascot,” Zak says. “Anyway, Clay, you wanna go and buy your luggage.”

“Oh, speaking of which,” Eret says. “I’m coming with you guys on the school trip.”

“What? Why?” Nick asks, eyes bulging.

“Because of the police investigation,” Eret says, narrowing his eyes at him and folding his arms.

“The faculty’s questioning coincides with the trip, so most of them wouldn’t be able to go. They’ve invited seniors to be chaperones and being the head of the Student Council... Well, it wouldn’t be just myself. There’ll be other seniors there as well.”

“Oh.”

“It wouldn’t be any different than in school, would it?” Eret says, clearing his throat. “We can think of the distortion and the venue when overseas.”

“We’ll let you know via chat if we find anything too,” Gina says. “Now you guys got a trip to pack for! Shoo!”

“We can take care of Floris while you guys are away,” George says, picking Floris up into his arms. “You can take the couch, Floris.”

“What? I always had the bed!”

“The house would have fewer clumps of fur tonight.” Clay laughs. “No need to pick up after Floris anymore.”

“Hey! What does that mean? I don’t shed that much fur!”

“You shed a lot of fur over summer,” Nick says. “I had to vacuum every other day.”

“And I had to keep your fur off my bedsheets,” Clay says.

“I can’t help it...”

“I’m sure I can handle it,” George says. “Don’t worry. He’ll be safe here.”

The rest of the Thieves decide to leave them to their investigation, since, as Gina mentioned, they have a trip to pack for. It’s be the first time Clay’s looked forward to a school trip, a trip out of the country with his friends. He can hardly contain his excitement as he and Zak head out to Pointe Boulevard to grab their supplies, the others going their separate ways to buy all that they need for the trip.

*

9/5 – SATURDAY – EVENING

“I heard you’re going on a school trip. To Hawaii.”

“Yeah,” Clay says, shooting the white ball at the black one and watching the balls bounce off the walls, some headed for holes, the others just scattering wherever. “Wait, how’d you know?”

“Connections.” Blade assumes his stance. With a gentle push, the white ball rolls steadily towards the green one, knocking it with just enough force to send it rolling into the furthest hole.

“That tells me nothing.”

“My partner has a son who goes to the same school as you.”

“Oh.” Right. It’s Clay’s turn. He moves into position, aiming his stick at the white ball. Breath held, he sends the white ball careening into a cluster of red balls which ricochet off the walls and plopping into the holes, effectively clearing nearly all the balls on the table.

“Oh my God.” Clay stares, shell-shocked, at the sight before him. Blade relaxes, placing his stick on the table.

“Well, there’s that,” Blade says with a small smile. “As promised, I will use my right hand.”

Holy shit. After so many months of darts and billiards, he’s won. He won by one point. He won one game against Blade. Clay can hardly believe his eyes. He rubs them and turns back to the table, his score still flashing on the scoreboard.

“Holy shit,” Clay breathes.

Unfortunately, Blade’s skill once he has started using his right hand is seemingly unparalleled. His shots are cleaner, more precise, manipulating the entire billiards table like a grandmaster would a chessboard. It’s as if Clay has overcome a treacherous ordeal, only to hit a brick wall immediately.

“Have you ever considered getting good?”

Clay wants to sock him across the face. “That’s unbeatable. *You’re* unbeatable.”

Blade shrugs. “If you want to beat me, you have to train for another hundred years.”

Clay gives him a deadpan look. Blade laughs that weird monotone laugh of his. There’s a lot more to Blade than the mask he’s been wearing. To be honest, it’s somewhat rewarding when Clay can tease out the tiny, genuine bits that is just so terribly rare.

“I’ll beat you next time,” Clay says. “I will.”

Blade hums. Their time is up, and unless they want to pay extra, they are going to have to leave now. “I haven’t had this much fun in ages.”

Competitiveness aside, Clay has to agree. Playing with Blade, despite being a challenge in itself, is somewhat...enjoyable. What started out as an undercover intelligence-gathering mission has evolved into a close friendship and an even closer rivalry.

“Are you going on any school trip?”

Blade shakes his head and gives him an incredulous look. “I’m a senior. I have SATs this year.”

Oh.

“Well, I’m not gonna wish you a safe flight because as smart as I am I can’t predict the wind currents. The easterlies and westerlies...”

“Basically you’re not going to wish me a safe flight.”

“Essentially, yes.”

Clay puffs his cheeks out. “I’m not going to wish you a safe trip home, then.”

Blade snorts and begins to head down a narrow street, holding a hand up in a half-hearted wave. Clay sets off for the train station as well. He hasn't finished packing yet and he has an appointment tomorrow...

*

9/6 – SUNDAY – DAYTIME

“We wish our dog Goldie can return home...” Clay reads off the post-it note. A date is scrawled in the corner in the childish handwriting of the author. It is written a couple of months ago. How the heck is Clay supposed to track down a dog that disappeared a couple of months ago?

Ant meows and scampers off, Clay following after it.

“Hey! Wait!”

Ant darts behind bushes, forcing Clay to find alternate routes as he chases the cat that has suddenly gone berserk. Or perhaps it is perfectly sane and is leading him somewhere...

Eventually, Ant turns down into a cobblestone path leading into the nearby forest, populated with dense trees and ferns. Copious amounts of leaves block Clay's view, only managing to catch the flash of beige as Ant continues its acrobatic act.

Clay manages to catch a breather with his arm against a thick trunk, bending over and gulping down gasps of fresh air. Ant has slowed its pace, meowing cautiously as it approaches a small cliff face overgrown with moss.

Clay has never been out here before, not even with Nick, despite its proximity. He waits till the sourness in his thighs fades before following Ant towards the cliff face where a small hole opens up in its side.

“Ant?” Clay peers into the dark cavern. The only light source the sunlight filtering through the leaves, casting a single pool of light on the ground. Clay is barely able to make anything out. Before long, Ant re-emerges from the cavern, nudging a tiny puppy along. Clay gathers the puppy into his arms. Then another and another. Three puppies in total. They don't seem like newborns, yet they don't seem old enough to be able to take care of themselves.

Something seems to click in Clay's head. These must be...He switches on his phone's flashlight and shines it through the cave, his weak heart expecting something to jump out at him. However, all he sees is the body of a golden retriever slumped against the wall. Its chest still moves, but it looks to be already on death's door.

Is that...Goldie?

Ant meows by the dog's side, settling beside the dog as it struggles to breathe, its eyes closed. The puppies beside Clay are restless, tails wagging, barking incessantly.

Clay can only watch as Ant stays by the dog's side, the dog's breathing getting shallower and shallower until...it stops moving entirely. Clay never did think he'd live to see an animal die in front of his eyes. Motionless. At peace.

Ant rests a paw on the dog's for a couple of seconds before wriggling back out through the cavern entrance, staring up at Clay with shining eyes, before bending down and nudges at a puppy's rump, encouraging it to walk down the same path that they had taken to get here. Easier for quadrupedal animals, Clay would like to think, as he carries one puppy in each arm, careful not to trip over any

branches or logs on the way back, sighing in a flood of relief as he returns to civilization.

Ant seems to know where the owner of Goldie stayed, because it leads Clay to a quiet cottage just by the edge of the woods. Clay manages to transfer one puppy to the other arm, rapping his knuckles against the door.

A young girl has answered, appraising him for a second before noticing the three puppies by his side.

“Mom! Mom! Goldie’s back!” the young girl leaves the door hanging wide open, and Clay can only stand there, keeping the puppies close to his chest, as the girl returns with her mother.

“Who are you?”

“Um...” Clay isn’t sure how to answer this. He glances around for Ant, only to realize that the cat is missing. “I found Goldie in the forest, and...uh...these are her puppies.”

“Goldie?” the woman shoots him a suspicious look. “Goldie’s been missing for months. We’ve pretty much given up...Then again...” She exchanges a glance with her daughter. “Goldie *was* pregnant before she left.”

“Mom, can we keep the puppies? They’re Goldie’s kids, right? Please!” the young girl asks, almost vibrating with excitement and elation. Her mother fixes Clay and the puppies with a thoughtful stare. She agrees, and the girl cheers. The three puppies are welcomed into their home.

“I must thank you for finding her,” the woman says, shutting the door behind her. “Goldie, that is. She went missing and we couldn’t find her and...well, I’m glad to know that at least her puppies are safe.”

Clay gulps.

“I hope Goldie’s resting in a good place now,” the woman says with a smile. “Michelle put that request up in the church’s request board. It was to pacify her. Somewhat. I never did think that anyone would go out of their way to search for it except...well, Velvet.”

There’s that name again. The boy who worked at the church before it became abandoned. The boy that Ant was especially close to.

“Velvet always had a cat with him. The cat that brought misfortune,” the woman says, sighing. “That cat was a bad sign, but it seems to have disappeared ever since Velvet’s death. Maybe it was *because* of that cat that that boy passed on in the first place.” There is clear bitterness in her tone.

“But it was Ant who found the puppies,” Clay says. “The cat...”

“Then maybe it was because of that cat that Goldie went missing and died,” the woman says, her placating smile instantly morphing into an ugly scowl. “If that cat hadn’t been there, then...” She stops herself and apologizes for taking up so much of Clay’s time. She closes the door with a forceful thud and lock slides into place.

Soft fur against his calves alert Clay to Ant’s presence. Ant purrs once before making its way back to the house. A cat that brings bad luck? It’s the second time that Clay’s heard this story. Could the rumours be true?

Nah. Clay refuses to believe it. Ant has been nothing short of helpful, especially when it has the capacity to fulfil the requests so far by itself, leading Clay exactly where he needs to, guiding him

along as he does the legwork.

Such a creature can never, in Clay's opinion, be evil.

*

Chapter End Notes

Priestess arcana rank 6 -> 7 (technoblade)

Devil arcana rank 4 -> 5 (AntF.)

Kindness +3 (doing requests)

School Trip To Hawaii Part I

Chapter Summary

finally they're headed for hawaii

Chapter Notes

FINALLY I CAN INTRODUCE TAPL he has waited 96 chapters for his first appearance and he doesn't even so much as speak

9/6 – SUNDAY – EVENING

“All packed for tomorrow?”

Mr Armstrong stands at the entrance of the room, watching in undisguised amusement as Clay attempts to close his luggage, struggling in vain with the zipper.

“Maybe you’ve brought too much stuff,” Nick says, moving his luggage to the corner of the room.

“I don’t think I brought *that* much.”

Nick begins to go through the contents. “Uh...why do you need to bring three comic books? Your headphones *and* your AirPods? Why do you even have a bag of chips...*five* bags of chips?”

“I think those can remain at home,” Mr Armstrong agrees. “Even so, eating five bags of chips alone is not good for your health.”

“No one brings homework to a school trip!” Nick cries.

“Tell Mr Robbs not to give homework due right after the trip, then!”

Mr Armstrong laughs. “Dinner’s almost ready. Unfortunately, your mother will not be joining us tonight. She’s got work. But she’ll be able to send you both of tomorrow morning.”

Nick literally glows at that. Mr Armstrong heads back down to check on the stew, leaving the two boys to pack Clay’s luggage, with Nick throwing out all his textbooks and worksheets and *laptop* and snagging some of Clay’s chips for himself.

*

9/7 – MONDAY – DAYTIME

“Darryl!”

Darryl looks up from his phone to wave at Nick and Clay approaching. Mrs Armstrong had dropped them off before heading to work, giving each of them a goodbye hug and telling them to

stay safe.

“I’m so ready for this,” Nick says, pumping his fists into the air.

“Same,” Darryl says, putting his phone into his pocket, a wide smile on his face. They are surrounded by many other students from the same year, each with their own luggage and chatting excitedly, gathered around the luggage check-in counters.

It is Eret who manages to get everyone’s attention and to initiate the settling of administrative details, such as taking attendance, checking in their luggage, handing out the flight tickets...Clay retrieves his passport from the officer at the gate and he’s in, meeting up with Darryl, Nick and Eret at the other side.

“Well, we’ve got some free time now,” Eret says. “Let’s take a walk around.”

Clay doesn’t remember the last time he’s been to an airport. He has once when he was very young. He doesn’t recall much of it, being a toddler and all, but he just knows that he hasn’t set foot in an airport since. They decide to explore the various stores selling foodstuffs, expensive coats, electronics, books and many more, each display flashier than the last.

The announcement overhead signals their turn to board, and the group finds themselves running over to the boarding gate, luggage towed close behind them.

By noon, Clay is already settled into his rather-cramped economy seat. He’s fortunate enough to share the same row as Darryl and Eret, while Nick is just across the aisle from him, already perusing the magazine detailing the list of movies they offer as well as the other forms of in-flight entertainment.

Clay’s heart soars with the plane as they take off, the rumble of engines, the chill of the cabins highlighting his exhilaration as they are finally en route to Hawaii.

*

9/7 – MONDAY – EVENING

“Here we are! In Hawaii!” Clay throws himself onto the soft bed, revelling in its feathery softness. The crash of the rolling waves by their window is a rhythmic lullaby, accompanied by the gentle sea breeze. Being able to book a hotel so near the seafront is such a blessing.

Darryl leans against the balcony, watching the palm trees sway in the wind. “Well, it wasn’t exactly the most relaxing flight.”

“Tell me about it.” Aside from the infant that had been crying continuously, the spilled drink on Clay’s lap and the general inconvenient turbulences, they’ve arrived safely in Hawaii.

Since they had to room by classes, Darryl is, naturally, the best choice since George isn’t here. Nick had been disappointed at first, but rules are rules. Besides, Clay has already been rooming with him since April.

“What are we doing tomorrow?” Clay asks.

“You’re closer to our bags. Go check it yourself.”

Clay groans, rolling out of bed and heading over to the couch where they dumped their bags, digging out their itinerary plan handed to them before they headed to their rooms.

“Visiting Waikiki beach. A ton of free time...” Clay reads through the list. “Then we’re going to Diamondhead...”

“Ooh, is Diamondhead that volcano?” Darryl asks, returning from the balcony and walking over to his luggage.

“I’ve never heard of it. Probably,” Clay says. He looks through the other days’ itineraries. A food tour around Honolulu, shopping at Ala Moana Centre... Sounds eventful. They’d be returning on the twelfth of September – oh, it’s actually longer than Tommy’s, then – and after that, they can go back their Phantom Thief business as per usual.

He wonders how George and Gina are doing back in Fariold...oh, and Fundy too. He wonders if they’ve found the distortion and the location. Wonders if they’ve made a first excursion into the Palace if they did.

The door to the bathroom slides open and Darryl steps out, dressed in a thin T-shirt and baggy track pants, towel and used clothes draped over an arm. He stuffs them into a laundry bag and into his luggage, hanging the towel out to dry.

“It’s your turn in the shower.”

“Oh.” Clay peels himself off the straw chair and deposits the itinerary into his haversack. He grabs his change of clothes and heads on over to the shower room.

Tomorrow’s going to be a long day. He should get some sleep while he can.

*

9/8 – TUESDAY – DAYTIME

“Waikiki Beach!”

The beach is way more beautiful than Mauve Beach back in Fariold. People are dressed in all kinds of coloured outfits fit for the sun and waves. Surfers ride the massive tides skilfully on their boards like dancers on a stage. Wakeboarders and kayakers venture out to sea, the engines of motorboats roar, the scent of the sea grows ever stronger.

“I wanna ride a banana boat!” Darryl watches several people boat by, crashing into the water that splashes everywhere.

“We were just at the beach, though,” Nick says, hands on his hips. “I kinda wanna see the volcano.”

“Well, technically it’s free time now,” Eret says. “We’ll head on over to Diamondhead later in the afternoon, so we should enjoy our beach trip while we can.”

They end up riding the banana boat – Eret chose to sit out of it, purchasing their lunch and greeting them with it once they’re done with their water sports. The group chows down, complimenting the sheer deliciousness of the lobster, the freshness of the crab, the tenderness of the fish meat.

“Seafood’s the best.”

Darryl nods, biting into a stick of lobster meat. “I have to agree.”

“Just wondering,” Nick says mid-chew. “How much does this cost?”

Eret laughs. “A thousand bucks.”

“You’re joking. You’re definitely joking,” Clay says. Darryl’s eyes bulge from their sockets. “There’s no way this costs a thousand bucks.”

“You’re right. I was just messing with you. It’s ten thousand.”

They end up paying him ten dollars each before boarding the coach that would take them to Diamondhead.

*

9/8 – TUESDAY – EVENING

“I’m pooped.”

Clay yawns, settling into the straw chair by the balcony.

“The climb was exhausting.”

“Nick ran out of water halfway.”

“I had to give him some of my water.”

“Then I had to give you both water.”

Clay checks his messages. None from the Phantom Thieves group actually regarding Phantom Thief activities, though Nick has been spamming pictures that they’ve taken at the beach, of their food, the Diamondhead, their hotel...

Tomorrow will be yet another tiring day. Yet, when Clay shuts his eyes, bathing in the glow of the moon, he hears an insistent series of knocks on the door. Darryl is singing his lungs out in the shower, so Clay nearly missed it. Unfortunately, he did not, so he rises, nursing his aching thighs and calves, and peeks through the peephole.

“What the heck are you doing out here?”

“I got kicked,” Nick says, barging in and flopping onto Clay’s bed. He’s already showered, the shampoo’s lemony scent wafting off his wet hair. “My roommate invited his girlfriend over and it was getting *real* awkward.”

Clay snickers as he locks the door.

“Who’s singing?”

“Who else?”

“Huh,” Nick says, limbs spread out across the whole bed. “Never would have figured he’s the kind of guy to sing in the shower.”

“Get off my bed.”

“Or what?”

“I’ll kick you off and out. Have fun sleeping in the hallways.”

“You’re evil.” Nick rises anyway, moving over to the couch with a pout.

Darryl emerges from the bathroom, doing a double take when he realizes that there’s an extra body on the couch.

“What’s he doing here?” Darryl gapes at Nick whose back is turned to them.

Clay explains the situation to him, and Darryl nods understandingly.

“Does anyone have a charger?” Nick asks. “I left mine in my room and honestly, I don’t want to go back and get it.”

“I can see that,” Darryl says. “The charging point’s over here, though, so you gotta come over.”

Clay walks over to switch the lights off – the switch being near the door – only to hear a knock. A more sophisticated knock as compared to Nick’s banging on their door. Clay opens the door once he recognizes the person outside, and in strides Eret in a nightgown with bloodshot eyes.

“You look like a train ran you over.”

“Why’s the Student Council President even here?” Clay asks. “What if the teachers find out?”

“The teachers,” Eret says with a loud, mirthless laugh. “Try sleeping next to a room where said teachers are getting it on.”

“That sounds rough, buddy,” Nick says, and gestures to the rug beside him. “Sorry, I’m taking the couch.”

“I don’t mind sleeping on the floor as long as I can get away from all that,” Eret says. He’s even brought his pillow. “Are you guys sleeping yet?”

“I am,” Clay says. “Not sure about the others.”

“I’m dead tired. Let me die in peace,” Nick mumbles from the couch.

“Same here.”

“Alright then,” Eret says, making himself comfortable on the rug. “Good night.”

Day one had been eventful, and Clay is sure it can only get better. Exploring Honolulu on a food trail and shopping at Ala Moana Centre...he can already picture it in his head.

Soon, Clay falls asleep to the peaceful sounds of crashing waves and the salty tang of the sea.

*

9/9 – WEDNESDAY – DAYTIME

“Do you think people would have heard of us over here?” Nick asks as they stroll about Ala Moana, past several boutiques and bookstores, past a group of Japanese tourists.

“It’s a distinct possibility,” Eret says. “Why not we ask around?”

It seems that, after several minutes of approaching complete strangers and posing the same question over and over: “Have you heard of the Phantom Thieves?”, it is safe to conclude that, indeed, they are famous. Even here. People have been talking about them, about the good they’re

doing, though some do not particularly care or hold negative opinions.

“It feels really good, don’t you think?” Darryl says as they take a break in the concourse, watching a few of their classmates walk on by, paper bags clutched in their hands. “Hearing all those praises.”

“Well, we can’t let ourselves get overconfident,” Clay says, perched against the arm rest of the bench. But he has to admit that it does feel amazing, to have people acknowledge the work you do. “We have to hope that Gina and George found something.” He glances at his team, only to find Eret’s gaze trailing to someone else seated on another nearby bench.

The boy wears a thin jacket and a red cap, hunched over his phone, thumbs punching the screen.

“Who’re you staring at?” Nick asks. “Who’s that?”

“That boy’s in my class,” Eret says. “I think his name was...Harvey? I didn’t realize he’s one of the senior chaperones.”

“Well, he’s not exactly chaperoning anyone right now.”

“Technically, it’s free time. Even for the chaperones,” Eret says. “The job scope was, to be honest, really loose.” He checks his phone. “Speaking of free time, we’re almost due to head back.”

“And we didn’t even buy anything.”

“Not true,” Eret says, holding up the plastic bag with the boutique’s logo on it. “I managed to find the shoes I was looking for.”

“Oh, right, but the dress was too expensive.”

“That whole place was very expensive,” Clay agrees. “Can’t believe you even bought it.”

“I couldn’t find it back at Fariold. Not even at Pointe. If I find it here, I’d definitely buy it,” Eret says with a sparkle in his eye. “And I’m saving up for the dress; don’t you worry.”

They hurry back to the coach waiting for them in the carpark, where most of their schoolmates have already gathered and are beginning to board the bus. Nick settles into the window seat beside Clay, with Darryl taking the seat across the aisle. Being a senior, Eret is taking another coach.

The coach splutters and moves off, cruising down the highway headed back to their hotel.

*

9/10 – THURSDAY – EVENING

“I can’t believe we ate at a Big Bang Burger,” Clay says, sighing. “Aren’t we supposed to be soaking in the Hawaiian culture or something?”

“We had a food trail yesterday,” Darryl points out.

The group, minus Eret because the latter needs to settle some administrative matters with the teachers, is gathered in the lobby, having decided to take a walk around the premises. The sun hasn’t quite set, its rays piercing into the building, adding a touch of golden to the already-colourful lobby. The nearby television blasts the news regarding the upcoming election taking place at the end of this year.

“God, I’m getting tired of hearing that name,” Nick says, shaking his head. “It’s always Singh this and Singh that.”

“Well, he’s the most vocal out of all the congressmen,” Darryl says. “Plus people are saying he’s got the country’s best interests in mind.”

“Really?” Nick sounds unconvinced.

Clay’s eyes snap up to the screen when the picture changes from that of Markus Singh to that of the Phantom Thieves. No, it’s just their logo, but the person of interest in this program is Blade himself. Judging from the silence of the other two, they seem to have noticed the switch in content too.

[“Mr Blade](#), thank you for coming onto the show,” the host says. “You have been investigating the Phantom Thieves, have you not? The ones who had made a name for themselves.”

“Never did I think I would see his face even here,” Nick mutters, but his eyes are glued to the screen.

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“However, it seems that the Phantom Thieves have gained a lot of popularity after having taken down such an international corporation,” the host says, almost patronisingly. “They have saved the people of Fariold from a terrible fate.”

“That may be so…”

“What do you think of the Phantom Thieves now, Mr Blade? Has your stance changed?”

Blade clears his throat, tugging at his tie. “No. I still maintain that the Phantom Thieves should be arrested and tried in a court of law. What they are doing is nothing short of terrorism even now. It would impact us negatively in the long run.”

“I see. Many people seem to be against you now, ever since you have declared that the Phantom Thieves are not just,” the host says. “How do you feel about that?”

“For starters, I never did say that they weren’t just—”

“I have heard that you received many death threats from fans of the Phantom Thieves,” the host says. “Is this true?”

Blade shifts uncomfortably. When he speaks, his voice comes out choked. “Yes. That is true.”

“Don’t you think that there could have been a reason behind their support?”

“What kind of host is this?” Darryl says, turning away. It’s painful to even listen. Nick pushes himself onto his feet, headed for the cafeteria. Darryl and Clay follow him, glad to be free from the jarring voice of that host…

School Trip to Hawaii Part II

Chapter Summary

it is as the title says

Chapter Notes

second part of hawaii school trip!

and something terrible happens...

9/11 – FRIDAY – DAYTIME

“It’s super hot out.”

“You were the one who wanted to take a walk.”

Gina hums. Floris is laid over her lap, tail curled around his body. Helen Park is sunny at this time of the day; the sun is blazing, scorching the very asphalt they walk on. They approach the same smoothie van they had come to the last time Gina was here, Gina parking herself at an empty picnic bench and reaching for her phone.

“You’re always playing that game,” Floris says.

Gina doesn’t answer. Instead, she starts up Valorant and is shooting opponents in a matter of seconds. It’s only then that Floris remembers that out of all the Thieves, she’s the only one that doesn’t understand him.

He shifts, moving from her lap to the seat beside her, warm despite being in the canopies’ shade.

George returns with two smoothies and waves a hand in front of Gina’s face, the latter letting out an indignant squawk.

“Wait, wait, wait! I’m almost done!”

George shrugs and takes a sip of his own smoothie. He holds the straw out to Floris. “You want some?”

“Nah. I’m good.”

“Foxes can’t drink smoothies, I think,” Gina says, letting out a tiny victory cry and puts down her phone, reaching for her watermelon smoothie and taking a large gulp.

Floris glances up when he catches movement out of the corner of his eye to find a woman walking up to them, dressed in sports gear. He recognizes her. She’s the counsellor that Clay had been seeing.

“Are you...?” the woman asks, holding out a hand in an awkward sort of wave. “George, aren’t you? From Enderlands?”

[George’s](#) eyes widen in mild surprise. “Yes, and you are...Dr Montgomery?”

“That’s right,” Dr Montgomery says. Floris sniffs, then turns his head away. She must have just finished her workout. “Who’s this?”

Gina has retreated to her phone, Valorant open on the screen, her head ducked and evidently trying to avoid eye contact at all costs. George touches her shoulder. “This is my sister, Gina.”

“Gina, is it?” Dr Montgomery smiles at her, but Gina refuses to lift her head, cheeks flushing a bright red.

“Oi. Say hi.”

Gina bites her lip, but looks up from her game, still not meeting Dr Montgomery’s eyes. “H-Hello.”

“Doctor, would you like a seat?” George asks. Dr Montgomery gratefully accepts and settles beside Floris.

“It’s a fine day outside, isn’t it?” Dr Montgomery asks pleasantly. “Despite the heat.”

“It is,” George says. “We should have left later, to be honest.”

Dr Montgomery nods. “How are you enjoying the outdoors, Gina?”

“It’s...it’s nice.”

Awkward silence.

“Sorry, Doctor. Gina doesn’t talk much,” George says. “She’s shy.”

“Oh, no, it’s fine,” Dr Montgomery says with a well-meaning laugh. “I’m sure she’s a lovely girl. I wouldn’t mind if you’d like to resume your game, Gina. Valorant, was it?”

Gina perks up that. “You know that game?”

“I’ve tried it before.”

“Ooh! Do you know there’s a new skin that came out but it costs a ton of money but I’ve been saving up and I’m finally gonna get the Singularity-“

George sighs, about to apologize once more, but Dr Montgomery seems to be keeping up with the conversation even as Gina spouts more and more terms that are all Greek to him.

“What’re you thinking about?” Floris asks.

“About my job,” George says, staring down at his smoothie. Floris can sense his the irritation from here.

“Oh. Clay had a shitty job and a great job. I think it just depends on your employee.”

“I have a demanding boss.”

“That sucks.”

“Tell me about it.”

Floris does overhear snippets of Gina and Dr Montgomery’s dialogue, having shifted from Gina’s games to cognitive science. Gina, unbeknownst to Floris, seems to have a vested interest in the subject, using even jargon even more bizarre to Floris’ ears.

“It was nice talking to you,” Dr Montgomery says with a smile. “I usually jog around here on Friday afternoons or Sunday mornings, if you’d like to hang out more.”

“Really?” Gina’s eyes brighten. “We can talk more about cognitive science, right? I really like that theory you were talking about. The one about the power of suggestion.”

“They’ve really hit it off, haven’t they?” George says, slurping up the last few drops of his smoothie.

“Yeah, they do.”

“If that’s fine with George, of course,” Dr Montgomery says, glancing over at him.

“He’s cool with it,” Gina says. “I promise you that.”

George chuckles. “Gina is my sister. I’d do anything for her within my power.”

Dr Montgomery ends up giving Gina her number. Gina could meet up with her whenever she’s free. To talk about “girl stuff” that George and the others wouldn’t understand, or about cognitive science.

“She works at your school?” Gina asks after they wave goodbye to Dr Montgomery and traversing the gravel path on their way back.

“Yeah. I’ve gone to see her a few times,” George says. “When I’m feeling stressed.”

“Stressed?” Gina wears a troubled frown. “From what?”

George scratches his chin. “Schoolwork, mainly. I never realized that school at Enderlands would be so hectic.”

“I wouldn’t go there, then.”

“You’re already taking college-level classes,” George says with a small laugh. “You wouldn’t need to.”

Floris’ ears press against his head, whiskers twitching. Hearing them talk about their experiences, talk about *human* experiences, sends a stab of jealousy through him like a knife through the chest. Still, the thought of learning who and what he really is when the Phantom Thieves reach the depths of Mementos...it is a motivator with a driving force unlike what he’s ever known.

*

9/11 – FRIDAY – EVENING

“That’s it. I’m done.”

Clay grabs the tongs and places a slab of beef on Nick’s plate. Nick groans and pushes the plate

towards Darryl, who accepts it without a second thought. Eret wipes his mouth with his napkin as he reaches to grill another batch of kimchi.

“I didn’t think we’d be eating Korean barbeque in Hawaii,” Clay says. “But we’ve ordered way too much.”

“Yeah, we did,” Nick says.

“We overestimated the capacities of our stomachs,” Eret agrees. He holds up the tongs full of kimchi. “Kimchi, anyone?”

“Hey, did George text us or anything?” Darryl asks, stuffing his mouth full of kimchi. Clay checks his phone, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. He’s so stuffed that he had hardly move without feeling like he needs to throw up.

“Gina did,” Clay says. “They’ve found the distortion and the location.”

“They did? What is it?” Nick asks, perking up.

“Dunno,” Clay says. “She told us she’d tell us when we get back.”

“She just wants to seem cool,” Nick says.

“We’re going back tomorrow,” Eret says. “We can find out from them then.”

“Anyway, we’re running out of time,” Darryl says. “We should get going.”

“Yeah, wouldn’t want them to leave us behind,” Clay says, stretching his arms, only for his belly to complain. God, he probably needs to use the bathroom once he’s back at the hotel.

They leave the restaurant thirty dollars poorer each, ambling over to the bus just in time to leave for their hotel.

*

[9/12 – SATURDAY – DAYTIME](#)

“Do you think Gina would like this?” Clay asks, holding up a pretty violet lava lamp.

“Probably,” Nick says, shrugging.

“Do you think I should get this? Or this?” Eret holds up two hoodies, one yellow and one pink, both with a cute chibi palm tree design holding up a sign shouting “Aloha!”

“Uh...that one,” Darryl says, pointing to the yellow one. “It’s brighter. Happier.”

Eret nods. “Makes sense.”

“You should totally get this for George,” Nick says, holding up a keychain – a wood-and-bone charm in the shape of a heart. “Confess your love with this.”

“I told you, I’m not going to confess-“

“Just a souvenir conveniently in the shape of a heart,” Nick says. “Or you could always get him this.” He holds up another keychain in the shape of a man wearing a Tiki mask.

“That actually looks more Hawaiian,” Clay says, and Nick puts the heart-shaped charm back. “I think I’ll get that.”

Darryl has decided on a surfer-themed hoodie as well as a strangely-designed scarf decorated with brightly contrasting colours and patterns reminiscent of batik paintings. For Zak, he insists. Zak would totally appreciate something eccentric like that. Eret merely walks away with the yellow T-shirt from earlier and Clay with the lava lamp and the charm. Nick doesn’t get anything for himself, but does get a box of shortbread cookies in the shape of pineapples.

For some reason, Clay feels like he’s missing something...or someone.

Well, if he doesn’t remember, it probably wasn’t important.

Soon, at eleven in the morning, they are already seated on the plane, waiting for take-off, bags of goodies stowed away in the overhead compartment. Their trip is coming to an end and soon they would be partaking in their daily school life and their Phantom Thieves activities again.

The engine roars and the plane begins to enter its taxi phase, before picking up speed along the runway and taking to the skies.

*

9/12 – SATURDAY – EVENING

Principal Patterson waits at the edge of the road, by the crossing. He dabs at the beads of sweat trickling down his temples with a handkerchief. The police station is already in sight, an officer on patrol standing guard in front of its gates. The road is rather busy today, all manner of vehicles paused at the intersection.

The lights overhead flash from a warm amber to a striking red. Pedestrians begin to cross the road, the principal included in the throngs. With every step, he’s getting nearer. Better to turn himself in and drag that man down with him than to bear the consequences alone.

All of a sudden, he stops.

Halts in place. Standing stock still in the middle of the intersection.

Eyes rolled back into his head, only the whites of his sclera visible.

Black substance oozes from his sockets, flowing down his cheeks like rivers.

The officer notices him a tad too late. When the green arrow blinks to life, cars begin to move, wheels screeching on the slippery asphalt. The officer yells, bounding forth, feet thundering against the pavement. The turning truck does not stop, however, instead swerving in its best efforts to avoid the motionless man, tyres shrieking, onlookers shouting and screaming.

All that resounds in the night is a deafening crash, clouds of black billowing into the evening sky. The truck has overturned, smoking from the bonnet.

Principal Patterson lies on the ground, breaths escaping his lungs for the last time, broken body moving no more.

*

“Welcome back,” Mr Armstrong says. The dinner table is covered with a huge spread of dishes.

Clay's mouth begins to water. After a long eight hours in the plane, eating tasteless airplane food, homemade meals are starting to look especially savoury.

"Is Mom at work again?"

"Yes," Mr Armstrong says with a frown. "She's been working so hard recently, but I heard that she was called to a scene tonight. Something urgent."

"I see."

"I've already set aside her portion of the dinner," Mr Armstrong says, "so feel free to eat to your hearts' content."

They chow down on the meal, but a bad feeling tingles Clay's spine. Something terrible has happened – his instincts are telling him – something that could potentially change the course of their Phantom Thief career...

A Weak Sense of Justice

Chapter Summary

fundy runs off and is nowhere to be seen

Chapter Notes

well now here comes the sort-of drama

9/13 – SUNDAY – DAYTIME

“Come on in.” George’s expression is grim, and Gina behind him looks equally glum. Clay can understand their reactions, though. He’s heard the rumours, seen the morning news on the television today, heard what happened from Eret as they were walking from the station.

“Could the Phantom Thieves be making a statement?” the news anchor says, script held in front of him. “With the death of the principal of Enderlands High, Mr Quentin Patterson...”

“I only found out about it this morning,” Eret says, biting at his nail.

“But we didn’t kill him,” Darryl says, expression downcast.

“No, we didn’t,” Clay says firmly. They were in Hawaii when it happened. It couldn’t have been the work of the Phantom Thieves.

“Do you think it could be the work of the Black Mask?” Zak asks. “This sounds like one of those psychotic breakdowns, right?”

Now that Clay thinks about it...it’s too convenient. Particularly the timing of it.

“Who’s this Black Mask you guys keep talking about?” Gina asks. “They cause these mental shutdowns or something?”

“Seems like it,” George says. “There’s been a lot of mental shutdowns this year, right? We think they’re the work of a guy in a black mask.”

“Our previous targets saw him, apparently,” Clay says. “But for some reason, you didn’t. Or maybe you did, just that we couldn’t get it out of you.”

Gina shakes her head. “Get it out of me? I don’t remember you trying.”

George shoots Clay a look, and Clay doesn’t press any further.

“Why not we go into Lee’s Palace?” Floris asks. “If the Black Mask is targeting people’s Palaces, we can ask his Shadow whether he’d seen them.”

“I don’t think we should jump into things so hastily,” Eret says. “The public doesn’t seem to view us in a good light right now.”

“Yeah, they’re calling us murderers,” Darryl mumbles.

“Our support hasn’t dropped by that much,” Floris argues. “If anything, it’s risen! Just look at the poll on the Phan-Site!”

“But even so, we shouldn’t draw any more attention to oursel-” George starts.

[Floris](#) lets out a frustrated huff and leaps onto the table. “Fine. If you guys are going to be pussies about it, then I’m going to have to take matters into my own hands.”

“Oi, what the heck’s gotten into you?” Nick asks.

“Your sense of justice is so weak that you can’t even do shit without the public telling you to?” Floris says, strutting off towards the door. “If you’re not going to steal his heart, then I’m going by myself.”

Floris is out the door before anyone can stop him, bounding out the door as fast as his little paws can take him, leaving the room shell-shocked.

“He’ll...he’ll be back,” Nick says, clearing his throat. “Once he gets tired of being a prick.”

“I don’t know about that,” Darryl says, still staring at the door. “He seemed pretty pissed.”

“We should go search for him,” Eret says. “He shouldn’t have gotten far.”

Clay bites his lip as he rises to his feet, realizing exactly what he forgot back in Hawaii. Regret sinks to the pit of his stomach. Gina promises to remain in the house in case Floris comes back despite being a little confused at the sudden turn of events while the team sets out to find him.

*

[9/13 – SUNDAY – EVENING](#)

Floris still isn’t back, not even after searching the neighbourhood around George’s house. George would call them if Floris returned and Clay and the others can continue looking for him on their end as well.

Nick is sleeping soundly, apparently more untroubled than the rest of them at Floris’ disappearance, claiming that he just needed some time to himself to think about things.

Clay finds himself staring at the Phan-Site at one in the morning, at the names of their potential future targets. The number of their votes, however, pales in comparison to that of Lee’s, who is now scoring around ninety per cent of the total votes, and the numbers are still climbing.

Some comments in the forum tab is nothing short of frightening. People are advocating murder, claiming that the principal must have had some shady dealings under the table and the Phantom Thieves are merely exercising their own justice.

These people are supporting *murder* of all things, although clearly, the Phantom Thieves weren’t the ones who did it.

How did things become like this? Clay sighs, burying his face into his pillow. There’s school tomorrow. He’s got to get some sleep, but even though his eyes are stinging and dry, even though

he's got a dull headache and an aching body, sleep rejects him, leaving Clay staring at the ceiling till the wee hours of the morning...

*

9/13 – SUNDAY – LATE NIGHT

“Oh crap...” Fundy can barely lift his head, bleeding from a wound to the back of his neck, fur matted with blood. Surrounded by a multitude of Shadows, metallic bodies swivelling, that cannot be further from humanoid.

“So weak. Not even a threat,” the largest robot comments, before turning tail and leaving, iron feet clanking against the steel panels of the floor. At his command, the other robots disperse as well, heading back to their respective patrol stations.

Fuck. He really messed up this time, and no one, not even the Phantom Thieves, are here to save him this time.

“What’s a fox doing here?”

A silhouette is cast on Fundy, the features of the boy darkened under the glaring lights. Who is that? Fundy squints, but his vision is blurry, his ears ringing.

“It’s dangerous, man. Let’s get you outta here.”

The boy’s touch is gentle as he scoops Fundy up into his arms. Fundy curls into his chest, absorbing as much warmth as he can, to chase away the freezing claws of death.

*

9/14 – MONDAY – MORNING

“Please tell us what the name of the phenomenon where it appears that the second hand on a clock has stopped is.”

Where the...what? For a moment, Clay expects Floris to pipe up from beneath the table with his thoughts, or, even better, the correct answer. He stares blankly at the board, wondering where the heck the question even popped up from.

“I thought you’d know the answer,” Mrs Aufbau mutters in her heavy German accent. “The answer is ‘chronostasis’.”

Well, that certainly didn’t earn him any points with the teacher. Still, schoolwork has moved to a much lower rung on his priority scale. He stares out the window, wondering where Floris has gone. Is Nick right? Will he be back by evening?

Only the shrill ring of the bell can jolt Clay from his trance. Darryl shoots him a worried look, George trailing behind them as they walk down towards the cafeteria to meet up with the others.

*

9/14 – MONDAY- AFTER SCHOOL

“They’re getting away! After them!”

Leaning his back against the wall, the boy pauses to catch a break. They’re still no match for most

of the Shadows besides the weaker ones, so all they can do right now is run and hide using the cover of darkness.

“There’s a weak one just ahead,” the boy says. “Do we take it?”

His companion assesses the enemy then nods, readying his sabre. The two jump the lone, helpless Shadow and eradicate it in mere seconds. The Shadow bursts into ash, and the two find themselves in front of a giant door.

“Authentication required.”

The boy approaches the iris scanner hooked up to the door, coiling wires snaking along the ground.

“Authorised entry for Harvey Lee.”

The door opens and the duo heads right through.

*

9/14 – MONDAY – EVENING

“I really don’t think we can find him here, guys.”

It’s no use. They can’t find Floris anywhere. Not in the school, not in Valentine’s, not even around Nick’s house. It’s as if he disappeared into thin air...as if he was never there to begin with.

“Where could he be?” Nick kicks a pebble on the road, the stone skipping down the sidewalk and lodging itself into a small groove.

Clay swallows. He’s never felt worse than he ever did in this one moment. Is Floris right? That their sense of justice is so weak that they are so easily swayed by the public’s opinion? More importantly, why did he just run off like that? Was it something they said?

“Wait a minute, Floris did say something as he was leaving, right?” George says. “Something about going alone?”

“You mean the Palace?” Darryl’s eyes widen. Realization dawns on the group. “But it’s dangerous in there!”

Eret furrows his brows. “He could have gone in by himself. I think we should check it out as soon as possible. Tomorrow, perhaps. George, you have the distortion and the location, correct?”

“Yeah,” George says. “It’s the Lee Foods’ company building and the distortion is space station.”

“Space station? How’d you even guess that?” Nick mumbles.

“In any case, we’re going to get Floris back if it’s the last thing we do,” Clay says, raising his voice to get their attention. “Tomorrow, after school, we’ll go in to find Floris.”

The team agrees and disperses for the day. Clay heads home with Nick, the duo entirely silent on the train. Floris has *got* to be in the Palace. He *has* to be.

*

9/14 – MONDAY – EVENING

Clay nibbles at his pen, history essay laid out on the floor. He's unable to concentrate, mind wandering to Floris' whereabouts. The worst-case scenarios pop into his head, buzzing in his mind like pesky flies.

What if he's severely injured, hiding out somewhere and waiting for them to save him? Or what if he's taken hostage and is slowly being tortured? What if he's de-

Clay shakes that last thought away. Nah, that can't happen to Floris. Not that sassy fox.

"You're still up?" Nick walks into the room with his towel draped around his neck, smelling of citrus.

"Well, yes," Clay says. "I mean, in case Floris comes back."

"Probably soon," Nick says, shrugging. "Even he can't stay outside for that long."

"Dunno. He seemed pretty pissed."

"Wonder what ticked him off," Nick says, draping his towel on the drying rack by their window.

"Still, he was surviving somewhat before we turned up."

Nick barks out a laugh. "Surviving? He was all locked up in Krones' castle."

His tone jabs at Clay. Floris must have had another reason for leaving them, other than their 'weak sense of justice', as he put it. Could it be...?

He'll ask Floris when he sees him next. Clay yawns, deciding that there's absolutely no way he can focus, and stuffs his foolscap pad into his bag. He climbs into bed and throws the blanket over himself.

It seems oddly...empty. Even when Floris needed some space to himself, moving to the corner of the bed, he was still there. That little bundle of orange fur with his tail wrapped around him. Now that he's gone...

Clay's eyelids droop shut, the lack of sleep from last night catching up to him. They're going to go into Lee's Palace tomorrow, where Floris said he'd be at. They'll find him. They'll definitely find him.

Within seconds, he's fast asleep, phone in hand, buzzing with unread messages.

Stakeout

Chapter Summary

TapL really appears this time

Chapter Notes

yooooooooooooooooooooo im back this week is gonna be hell for me theres like 3 tests

confrontation with fundy on chapter 100 wowwww we hit the big 1-0-0

turns out there's this part of ur stomach called "fundus" it's like the only part i remember

9/15 – TUESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“Lee Foods Private Limited. Space station.”

The space morphs around them, voids of black and red dragging them towards the Metaverse. Dream finds himself decked out in his coat and gear, his white mask fitting snugly on his face. Oh, he’s felt so naked without it.

The rest of the Thieves’ outfits have also changed, their masks adorning their faces once more. It feels like forever since Dream’s seen them like this. Much too long, in fact.

“Alright, Floris has got to be in here somewhere,” Bad says, glancing around. They appear to be at the entrance to a futuristic space port. Computer screens flash to life around them, indication lights blinking green and red. In the middle of the circular room stands a control panel for an elevator if the arrow buttons are anything to go by.

“Well, let’s get going,” Navi says. “There’s a whole level below us, so we’re going to have to take the lift down.”

Everyone squeezes onto the tiny platform and Navi activates the panel. The platform they stand on jerk to life and the group begins to descend further down into the space station.

Unbeknownst to them, someone else has slipped in, hidden from view. His eyes are wide as he takes in his surroundings, but most importantly, the group of Thieves whose clothes just changed before his very eyes, who definitely fit the description of the “Phantom Thieves of Hearts”.

*

There are a couple of weak Shadows that Dream and the others dispatch efficiently with a few shots from their guns and swings of their swords. They do not get far, however, with no sign of Fundy anywhere, leaving Dream more and more worried.

“Where could he be...?” Eret glances around, stumped expression on his face. “If he’s not here, then...?”

“Maybe he’s further in,” Skeppy says. “Wow. He’s tenacious if he got this far. I don’t think I can handle those Shadows alone.”

Dream hums, taking the lead. The next door leads to a large room filled with desktops, running computers and CPUs, without a hint of a Shadow in sight. Synthetic plants stand in the corners in their featureless metallic plant pots. Dream prefers the organic kinds in the gardening club any day.

The only thing of interest in that room is a giant metal door, a scanner of some sort built into the wall beside it. “Authentication required” flashes across the LED screen above in emotionless block lettering.

“Authentication...?” Navi approaches the scanner.

“Seems like it,” Eret says.

“It’s an iris scanner,” Navi says. “I think that only Lee’s Shadow can unlock this door.”

“Then Fundy wouldn’t have been able to pass through the door, right?” Bad says, hope in his voice. “That means that if he came into the Palace, he would still be around here somewhere.”

A familiar, chirrupy voice singsongs from above them.

"You guys actually came."

[Dream](#) whips his head around at the sound, noticing two figures standing above them on a ledge, hopping down into view.

“Fundy!” Nick cries. “Why the fuck did you go-“

The look Fundy fixes them is nothing short of contempt, sending a stab through Dream’s chest as he turns his attention to the other person with Fundy. This boy has a mask as well, a rectangular piece of metal over his eyes, coloured with a bright orange and a striking green.

“Who’s that with you?” Navi asks.

“This is my new partner, TapL,” Fundy says, paws folded.

“You guys are the Phantom Thieves?” TapL asks, mimicking Fundy’s pose.

“That’s right, and Fundy’s our friend,” Dream says. TapL’s mask isn’t black, so he can’t possibly be the black mask that’s behind the mental shutdowns.

“We’re not friends,” Fundy says, words cutting through the tension in the air like a hot knife through butter.

“Hey, what’s that supposed to mean?” Nick shouts, but Dream grabs his shoulder and drags him back.

“Fundy, why’d you run off like that?”

“We’re here to steal the Treasure,” Fundy says, “and you guys better get out of our way.”

“But you can’t get past the-“ Navi starts, only for Fundy and the mysterious stranger to walk right

up to the iris scanner. A little *too* confidently. TapL removes his mask and allows the lasers to scan his eyes.

Almost immediately, an automated voice speaks and the cyan words above the door turns green.

“Authorised entry for Harvey Lee.”

Harvey Lee?

Fundy and TapL spin on their heels, the door sliding open behind them. “See you, suckers!”

[No sooner](#) has the door completely opened that Dream notices the horde of Shadows behind it, beeping and clacking and thrumming. Their eyes flash a dangerous red, bursting into their demonic forms.

“Behind you!” Dream shouts. He grabs his pistol and shoots the Mothman behind TapL. TapL’s eyes grow wide as he turns, raising his axe just in time to block an attack from another Shadow’s Freila.

If they stay here any longer, they’re going to get overwhelmed. They have to retreat. Now.

“Back to the entrance! Now!”

The Thieves and TapL waste no time in escaping, dashing back along the corridor, pursued by Shadows that Dream and Eret barely manage to hold off with Navi’s assistance. Shadows bleed through the walls, wriggling bodies plopping to the ground like tasteless jelly, taken out by Skeppy and Sapnap.

[By the](#) time they lost the Shadows and got back to the entrance, Dream is about to collapse on the ground, chest heaving as he struggles to get air through his lungs.

“That’s...I’m done,” Sapnap says, breaths quick and shallow. “I’m fucking done.”

“Lang...Language...”

“Where’s Fundy?” Navi glances around. Fundy and TapL are gone. They must have used the ensuing commotion to slip out of the Metaverse without their knowledge.

“Well, there goes our chance,” Skeppy mumbles.

“The problem here is the identity of that strange person with Fundy. How was he able to get past the security system?” Eret says.

“He must have been someone that Lee trusts,” Navi says. “Besides, the device said ‘Harvey Lee’.”

“Wait, I’ve heard that name before,” Dream says. “Eret, wasn’t he one of your friends?”

“Not exactly,” Eret says. “He’s just a classmate, but I could go and talk to him. I’ll update you guys tomorrow at the latest.”

“Alright then,” Dream says. “It’s not like we can get past that door anyway. Not without that guy’s help. Plus, we gotta figure out what’s happening with Fundy. For now, let’s wait for Eret’s info.”

The team agrees, and Dream pulls out his phone. Something flashes out of the corner of his eye. Is there someone here? A quick glimpse around tells him nothing. Perhaps it was just a trick of the light.

“Returning to the real world. Thank you for your hard work.”

*

9/16 – WEDNESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“I’m sorry. I don’t help people who don’t help their friends.”

“Help people who...” Eret appears to be at a loss for words. Clay shifts his weight from one foot to the other. He probably shouldn’t be eavesdropping, but he can’t help himself. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know what you guys have done, but Floris doesn’t feel like he’s a part of the team,” Harvey says. “If that’s what friendship means to you, then I think he’s better off without you guys.”

“Where is Fundy now?” Eret asks.

Harvey fixes him with an incredulous expression, then slides his headphones over his ears. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

With that, he pushes past Eret and strides down the corridor, continuing to play his game on his phone, evidently missing Clay on the way down.

Eret wrings his hands and sighs. He walks towards the staircase, where Clay greets him. Eret responds in surprise, but it is quickly replaced by dejection.

“So you heard all that?”

“Pretty much.”

“I think we should talk to the rest,” Eret says. “Do you mind texting them?”

Clay is already on it, rapidly firing off a message to the Phantom Thieves’ chat group, declaring that they need to meet at the hideout as soon as possible. He receives immediate affirmative replies and slips his phone back into his pocket.

He and Eret make for the train station, headed for George and Gina’s residence.

*

“So he thinks we’re neglecting him?” George asks.

The Thieves are gathered at the dining table. Everyone is present minus Gina, who has locked herself up in her room, claiming that she has something to investigate.

“Apparently,” Clay says. “Rather, we don’t make him feel like he’s a part of the team. In Harvey’s words.”

The group falls silent in contemplation. Floris had always been an integral part of the Thieves...or at least, that’s what Clay thought. He’s one of the few who founded the group, one of Clay’s first few friends when he came to this scary, foreign city.

Now that Clay has the chance to sit down and think about it, all the signs were there. Floris refusing to leave the house anymore besides following him to school, Floris moving to the other side of the bed, getting jealous over Ant... Moreover, after George joined the team, he’s been

getting more and more listless. Clay has been leaving him out of the main team more and more often, giving those positions to newer members. Perhaps, without meaning to, they had also said things that didn't sit well with Floris, even joked about his insecurities.

God. They really screwed up this time.

"I think we should apologize," Darryl says, eyes on the table.

There was no contest to that suggestion. Still, Clay wonders if Floris will hear them out, listen to what they have to say. Even so, will he trust them?

"Floris is living with Harvey now, right?" George says. "I say we try to arrange a meeting with them."

Eret and Clay exchange glances.

"About that..." They describe the dialogue in more detail, with Harvey's obvious disdain for them and their treatment of their teammate. Clay doubts that he'd let them speak to Fundy.

"Well...we're in a pickle then," Zak says.

"I'll try talking to him again," Eret says, sighing. "Just...I suppose I'll update you again tomorrow."

Clay nods. There is nothing they can do as of now, not when neither Floris nor Harvey are cooperative. Glancing over at the rest of the team, it seems that several of them require more time to think about it, about their behaviour and their situation as a whole. Clay knows *he* does.

They leave George's house that night after dinner. The trip back to Jule Halls is silent apart from the droning of the train on the rails.

Clay fidgets restlessly with his phone as he stares out the window at the plain, underground walls, heart still heavy with regret.

*

9/16 – WEDNESDAY – EVENING

Zak: yo guys check out the phansite

Zak: people are thanking us for requests we didn't even do

Nick: its not some kind of prank is it

Eret: I doubt it

George: I think it could be fundy and tapl

George: I mean they're the most likely candidates

Me: Then they've gone to Mementos

Darryl: then should we go in tomorrow?

Darryl: stake out mementos a little bit?

Me: Im okay with that

Nick: but we're not sure whether they'd be there

George: from what I could sense from harvey, his persona isn't that strong. They could have gone down there to train

Zak: makes sense.

Darryl: I don't mind going in tomorrow

Nick: same

George: if there are no objections we'll head into Mementos tomorrow, ok?

The chat goes silent after that, with Eret and Zak piping in with their agreements. Clay flops onto his bed. He's been dead tired ever since that run-in with that stampede of Shadows. He places his phone back on the shelf and buries his face into his fur-less pillow.

*

9/17 – THURSDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

Mementos is as dark and dank as always. No matter how many times they come down here, Dream would never get used to the wail of the wind, nor the waves of unsettlement bounding forth from its depths.

They've been waiting by the entrance for about an hour now. Sapnap and Skeppy have gone down to smack around some weak Shadows and to clear their head a bit, leaving Dream, Bad, Eret and George to wait around on the first floor. They come up before long, splattered with Shadow blood and ash.

"They're still not here yet?" Sapnap asks, taking two paracetamol tablets and slipping it into his mouth.

"Maybe they're not coming today," Eret says.

"Shall we try another day, then?" George suggests.

No sooner has he said that when Dream hears footsteps. Voices. He pushes himself off the wall, stepping between the duo and the entrance to Mementos. Fundy seems to have noticed their presence first, whiskers twitching and going on the defensive.

"What are you guys doing here?" Fundy asks. "Were you waiting to ambush us?"

"I wouldn't put it that way..." Bad starts, but Dream cuts him off with a wave of his hand.

"Fundy, we'd like to apologize," Dream says, a hand flat on his chest, over his heart. "We've been neglecting you recently, and it's, well, it's our fault for not realizing this."

"Really?" Dream can hear the obvious hope in his voice, despite the evident enmity in his actions. TapL remains behind them, seemingly unsure of what to say or do.

Skeppy is the next to speak. "We're really sorry, Fundy."

"We hope you can forgive us," Eret says.

“You’ll always have a place with the team,” Bad says. Fundy responds with a smile that mirrors their own.

“It’s not like we hate you or anything,” Sapnap says, scratching his head. “We’re still friends, even though you’re a little useless...”

[The](#) chamber goes deadly silent, and Dream resists the mounting urge to punch Sapnap across the face. Fundy’s smile quickly disappears, replaced by a snarl. “You think I’m useless.”

Sapnap must have realized his mistake, given the utter surprise on his face. “Well, not really...”

[“Sapnap,](#) apolog-“ George starts, but is interrupted when Fundy rushes by them, tearing through the crowd, headed for Mementos, TapL on his heels. *Crap!* Dream takes off after them, followed closely by the rest of the Thieves. From the platform at the bottom of the escalator, Fundy leaps into the air and morphs into the Fundybus. TapL jumps into the driver’s seat and speeds off.

There’s no way they’re going to be able to catch Fundy on wheels! Dream has never realized how expansive Mementos is, even in its smallest area. Even if the task seems impossible, they’re going to have to try.

“Fundy is just ahead,” Navi says, drawing up a map of the floor. “He’s headed towards a dead end. We can corner them there.”

Dream takes off, the balls of his feet crunching the gravel beneath, careful not to trip over the tracks.

If driving the Fundybus through Mementos instilled a sense of dread, then *running* in Mementos is downright *terrifying*. Shadows are everywhere. Shadows bigger than those they are used to. Dream shoots down a couple as they barrel through. A spear of light arrows through the air, taking down several Shadows at once, clearing the path ahead.

“Fundy!” Dream yells, feet grinding as he stomps down, halting as he watches Fundy double back upon reaching a dead end. “Can you please listen?”

“Get out of our way!” Fundy snaps, engine roaring threateningly. “Why would you guys want someone useless in your team? Step on it, TapL!”

“You got it!” The Fundybus barrels forward, and Dream barely has a fraction of a second to throw himself out of the way. Fundy had absolutely no intention of stopping. He could have run them down if they didn’t react fast enough.

“What the fuck is up with that fox?” Sapnap mutters, adjusting his mask. Groaning and screeching from behind them alerts Dream to the bunch of Shadows that have risen from the ground, murky bodies dripping from the ceilings.

“Hop to it! Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go!” Dream starts sprinting again. The chilly air of Mementos hurts his lungs, stabs at his airways as he pushes on, heading back the way they came.

“He’s stopped!” Navi cries between pants. “Something’s happened!”

When Dream reaches the intersection that they had passed earlier, the reddish glow of the lights at the entrance illuminating TapL, who seems to be carrying Fundy in his arms.

“The muffinhead crashed,” Skeppy mutters.

[Is](#) Fundy alright?" Bad is already running over, the wisps of Diarama curling around his fingers. TapL regards them with a glare, keeping Fundy close to him.

"He's fine."

"Fundy-" Dream starts, only for Fundy to wriggle out of TapL's hold and leap to the ground.

"Just admit it! You all think I'm useless." Fundy sounds so distraught it physically hurts. Dream can almost see the tears of frustration at the corner of his eyes. "You all think I'm fucking useless and I'm a burden and..." His voice wavers, trailing off.

"Fundy..." Dream takes a few steps towards them. TapL's hand is on the handle of his axe, eyes never leaving Dream.

Without warning, Fundy transmogrifies into the Fundybus, catching even TapL by surprise. Once TapL is in, they're off, circling around the Thieves and headed back to the entrance, where the two of them disappear into thin air.

Shit. They've lost their chance again.

Dream stalks up to Sapnap and grabs him by the collar. "What the hell were you thinking?"

Sapnap recovers quickly from the shock, baring his teeth. "Well, I wasn't exactly telling a lie!"

"Just because Fundy's navigational skills can't match up to Navi's or...or whatever doesn't mean he's any less helpful than the rest of us," Dream hisses. "We've all got our own niches."

Sapnap furrows his brows and Dream lets him go. Fundy's already gone. No point fighting amongst themselves now...

"I think we should...we should head back," Navi says, clearing his throat. "Let's think of another plan."

This stakeout is a massive failure. The rest of them agree reluctantly, heading to the entrance of Mementos and waiting as Dream retrieves his phone.

"Returning to the real world. Thank you for your hard work."

*

Always A Part Of Us

Chapter Summary

WARNING: scene involving molestation

The thieves solidify their resolve and TapL officially joins + Fundy rejoins

Chapter Notes

happy pocky day!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

9/17 – THURSDAY – EVENING

“Are you really sure you don’t wanna go back?” Harvey asks, as they walk along the deserted street, headed back to his house. “You were a little...conflicted back there.”

“No, I wasn’t. They don’t want me.”

“That’s not true. If they didn’t want you, they wouldn’t have chased after us like that.”

Floris remains silent, and Harvey doesn’t continue the conversation. Just then, the rumble of tyres has them turning towards the source – a sleek white car that slows to a halt by the sidewalk. Dread claws at Harvey as he stands, rooted to the spot.

Emerging from the car is a well-dressed man in a spotless lavender suit, blond hair parted down the middle. His foxy eyes rove all over Harvey in the most disgusting manner. Harvey takes a step back, suddenly feeling smaller than he is. The man before him is none other than Kenneth Samson, heir to the Samson Group, a mighty conglomerate that has virtually taken over the world of liquor.

“What are you doing out so late?” Samson asks, a light lilt to his voice.

“I was hanging out with some friends,” Harvey says, steeling his expression. This man’s observational skills are so astute that he can pick out uncertainty and fear...any weakness at all, actually, and use it against you.

“Some friends? You can’t lie to me, Harvey.”

Harvey stiffens, taking a couple of steps back. This man towers over him, a conniving smirk on his face. God, what Harvey wouldn’t do to just run right now. He wants to leave. He wants to get the fuck out of here.

“You were hanging out with another boy, weren’t you?” Samson snarls. “You were fucking around, right?”

He makes a grab for Harvey, who doesn’t manage to dodge in time, and traps him against the wall.

Harvey's back slams against the concrete, eyes snapping open to find himself caged in, Samson's hot, predatory breaths against his neck, his ear.

"You can't lie to me, Harvey."

Harvey seizes up. He can't breathe. His vision blurs, hyper aware of the pounding of his heart, the absolute tsunami of fear that washes over him as-

"What the fuckin-!" Samson shrieks, leaping away from Harvey as he kicks at the ground. Floris goes flying, body smacking the wall with a sharp yip.

"Floris!"

"Damn fox." Samson glares at the bleeding wound on his leg.

"Harvey!"

Harvey turns around to find a group of boys running towards him. Not just anyone, but rather, the Phantom Thieves. Relief crashes into him first and foremost, as the leader puts himself between Harvey and Samson.

"Are you okay?" the bespectacled Thief asks.

"I'm...I'm fine," Harvey says, arms wrapped around himself. God. He never wants to feel that man's touch ever again.

"What the hell's wrong with you?" the leader, the famed delinquent student, shouts, voice echoing down the streets.

"Are *you* the group that Harvey's hanging out with?" Samson glances from one Thief to the next. "You're all trying to steal him away from me, aren't you?"

"I don't care who the fuck you are, but I'm not gonna let you hurt my friends," the leader says. "I'm willing to call the cops on you and I'm not going to hesitate."

The cops won't do anything. Especially not when Samson's the son of a multimillionaire multinational corporation, with his father having ties to the police force and even with the government. Still, Harvey has to commend his boldness.

As expected, Samson laughs at that. Not the mirthful kind of laugh. It's the kind of laugh with the freedom of a man in power.

"You can certainly try," Samson says. He turns his back on them, clearly realizing that he is severely outnumbered. "I don't have the time to deal with all you peasants. Ciao."

Just before he steps into the car, he turns to Harvey, that triumphant smirk back on his face.

"I will remember this. You're not getting away that easily, kitten."

With that, he steps into the driver's seat, and the car zooms off, racing down the streets.

Harvey's knees go weak. He definitely doesn't want to go home today. Not to his father who would tell him to kneel and beg for his forgiveness, all because they need the cooperation of the Samson Group to further expand their business, fuelling his father's wealth in an effort to secure his position as a cabinet minister, at the very least, as part of Singh's party.

“Floris.” The leader of the Thieves runs over to Floris, who has picked himself up, stumbling over to them on wobbly legs. The leader scoops Floris up into his arms.

“You’re not hurt, are you?” the bespectacled Thief asks Harvey. Harvey shakes his head.

“Thanks for saving me. Honestly.” Well, that was embarrassing.

“Let’s talk back at George’s house,” the one with the deep voice says. Oh, Harvey recognizes him. That’s the Student Council president. “Harvey, I think you should come with us.”

Harvey nods stiffly. He doesn’t know who this George is, or where his house is, but he does not want to be alone right now.

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[“How are](#) you feeling?” Darryl asks, handing Harvey a cup of chamomile tea. Harvey accepts it gratefully, fingers curling around the warm porcelain. Clay watches from the other end of the table, Floris curled on his lap.

“I’m alright, but Floris...” Harvey turns in Clay’s direction, frowning.

“I’m fine,” Floris mumbles. “A little peachy.”

“Who was that?” Nick asks. “That guy?”

“That was...my fiancé,” Harvey says with a sigh. “My father’s the CEO of his company and basically, he wants money so he can be a congressman. That guy’s parents own a really big company too, so this marriage is to merge the families so my father...yeah.”

“Wait, so your father’s marrying you off to some douche so he can get money?” Zak’s eyes go wide.

Harvey hangs his head. “Something like that.”

“That’s just wrong,” George says. “Your dad’s...”

“And your dad’s Andre Lee?” Darryl asks.

Harvey nods. “You were in his Palace, weren’t you?”

“That’s why we wanted to steal his Treasure, to be honest,” Floris pipes up. “That guy is clearly controlling and, well, from what you saw...”

“I hate him,” Harvey says, fidgeting with the handle of his cup. “I hate him so much.”

The room is plunged into silence.

“I think he’s bad enough to warrant a little change of heart,” Eret says. “What do you guys think?”

Clay glances around, met with only the determined gazes of the other Thieves. “I think we’re all on board.”

[The only](#) one who’s remained silent, eyes not meeting his, is Floris, cast down onto the tablecloth.

“What say you, Floris?” Clay asks. “Any objections?”

“I mean, I’m not part of the Thieves...”

“No one’s ever said that,” George says. “You’re as much as Thief as the rest of us.”

Clay kicks Nick under the table, the latter hissing but getting the hint. “And you’re not useless. I mean, without your healing magic, I’m not sure we could have gotten as far as we did.”

“You taught us how to survive in the Metaverse at first too,” Clay says. “We would have been dead without you.”

Floris perks up at the praise. “You think so?”

“Yeah,” Clay says. “And besides, we’ve always considered you one of us.”

“Well then,” Floris says, tail standing straight up, ears perked. “I’ve got no objections to this mission.” He walks over to Harvey. “You fine with that? If your dad experiences a change of heart, he’ll probably call off the marriage.”

[“What are](#) we waiting for?” Harvey drains the last of his tea. “Let’s go right now.”

“It’s almost evening, and some people here have a seven p.m. curfew,” Floris says. “I think we should go in tomorrow, or the day after. We’ll still have to induct you into the Phantom Thieves, Harvey.”

“Wait, I’m joining?”

“If you want to,” Clay says. At this point, they’re just recruiting everyone who’s gone into the Metaverse...with the exception of the Black Mask, of course. “We’ll show you the ropes.”

“Sounds like my kind of thing,” Harvey says, voice brighter than before. Then, he frowns. “Wait, I forgot something.”

“What is it?” Eret asks.

“You see, my father’s probably going to want me to get married really soon since the election’s coming up,” Harvey says. “I’m not too clear on the details, but if I’m not wrong, the marriage is on October tenth.”

[“Tenth](#) of October, huh,” George mumbles. “Time is tight, then.”

“We’ll just have to go through the Palace like we always do,” Zak says.

“As long as we manage our time, it shouldn’t be a problem.” Clay scrolls through his chat log. “Harvey, can I have your number?”

“I’ll add him to the chat,” Eret says before Harvey can respond, pulling out his phone.

“You mean the Phantom Thieves’ chat? Wow. I thought you guys had some secret mode of communication or something.”

“We’re not that fancy,” Nick says with a chuckle.

“We usually meet up when everyone’s free, so that means Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays,” Clay informs him.

“Alright. I don’t have much going on, but I can’t stay out too late or, well...” Harvey trails off.

“It’s fine,” Clay says, jabbing a thumb at himself and Nick. “Seven p.m. curfew.”

With a new friend, the Thieves have gotten that much stronger. They agree to meet up on Saturday to give Harvey some time to rest. They’ll begin the infiltration on the nineteenth. With Harvey’s help, they should be able to get past that first barrier and see what lies beyond. Hopefully, they can avoid those hordes of Shadows as well.

George offers Harvey a place to stay for the night, to which Harvey declines, not wanting to intrude any longer. The Thieves part ways for the day, each headed back to their own humble abodes.

Floris is, naturally, tucked snugly in Clay’s bag.

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9/17 – THURSDAY – LATE NIGHT

“How’re you feeling?” Clay asks, lifting his blanket and Floris crawls underneath, snuggling close to him.

“I’m fine.”

“Welcome home,” Clay says, rubbing the top of his head as he settles for bed. Floris yawns tiredly, closing his eyes, tail wrapped around his body. Clay moves to plug his phone in to charge and dives under the covers.

It’s peacefully quiet, the only sounds the soft breaths from both Clay and Floris.

“Sorry.”

Clay turns his head. “What about?”

“For just running off like that. And not telling you guys about...what I really felt.”

“We’re not totally in the right either,” Clay says. “I, uh, kind of forgot to get you something from Hawaii.”

Floris laughs. “That’s okay.”

“We’ll get you to Hawaii someday. And the rest of the Thieves.”

“Yeah, when I turn back into a human,” Floris says. “It will be the first time I flew in a plane.” He yawns again, resting his head against the pillow.

“Sleepyhead.”

Curled up against each other, breaths nearly in sync, Clay and Floris fall asleep to the lullaby of chirping crickets.

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9/18 – FRIDAY – MORNING

“So, why is a soccer ball black and white?” Ms Jenkins asks. She stabs her whiteboard marker in Clay’s direction. “You there!”

Clay jolts in his seat and Floris snickers. He was not listening at all, so if she said the answer

previously...

“Cause of TV,” Floris says.

“Um...television?” Clay tries. Ms Jenkins claps.

“I didn’t think you were listening,” she says, and Clay literally melts into a puddle of relief.

“Soccer balls were originally white, but because of the invention of the black-and-white television, soccer balls were then painted with several black hexagons so it would be visible on TV.”

“Thanks, man,” Clay whispers.

Floris smiles.

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9/18 – FRIDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“Clay!”

Dr Montgomery catches up to Clay just as he’s about to leave with already one foot out of the gates. Floris dives back into the bag, keeping his head out of view.

“Doctor.” Clay turns around, hands in his pockets.

“May I take up a bit of your time?” Dr Montgomery asks, the brightest smile on her face. “I think I’ve made some headway in my research!”

“The one about helping people by changing their perception?”

“Something like that,” Dr Montgomery says, nodding. “If you’re not free now, we could always arrange for another time.”

Actually, Clay had wanted to pop on over to Phil’s shop to grab some new stuff. But, well, he can always do that in the evening.

“Sure.”

“That’s great! Let’s head on over to the office.”

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I just realized that there is a problem to which they may not be any solution. I’ve overlooked it because of all the progress and all,” Dr Montgomery says, sighing, “and, well, that has a lot to do with the fact that I am unable to help anyone outside my direct reach.”

“Isn’t that enough, though?”

“That’s what many may think. That it’s best to help a few than to help no one at all,” Dr Montgomery says, leaning back against her chair. “But I can’t be satisfied with all that. There are so many people out there who are suffering from intense pain, yet they are unable to speak out.”

“That may be true...” Clay’s thoughts lead straight to Floris and Harvey. There’s no one they could have talked to, no one that they could have shared their troubles with or derived solutions from. Perhaps these are the people that Dr Montgomery is speaking of.

“It’s even more appallingly obvious when I work as a counsellor,” Dr Montgomery takes a sip of her tea. She stares down at the steam rising from her cup in wisps. “Deep down, I know that helping those that I physically can is not enough for me. I want to help everyone with their problems.”

“That’s sort of a tough goal.”

“‘Tough’ is an understatement,” Dr Montgomery says with an amused laugh. “In fact, I think it’s nigh impossible, but I still...it’s still a dream of mine, to erase every single sliver of suffering from people’s hearts.”

Well, it is a commendable mission, but she’s right. An insurmountable task that borders on outright ridiculousness. It’s a nice dream, but it’s just that. A dream.

“Pain strikes the heart in infinite ways, but it’s because of that that we can also find an infinite number of ways to heal.” Dr Montgomery fiddles with the strap of her lanyard. “Maybe what I’ve learned from this whole experience is that even if we understand the human heart and have developed an effective way to soothe it, we cannot truly beat trauma.”

“Then what can we do?”

“Well, it would be best if we can just peer into the hearts of every single person, diagnose the root cause of their pain and remove that...” Dr Montgomery bites at her nail. “If only there was a way to quickly and efficiently understand everyone’s cognitions and perceptions...”

Clay stiffens. This conversation is hitting too close to home for comfort and yet...it is intriguing. Without the help of any supernatural elements, she has managed to think of this much, all for the sake of helping people. It truly is a noble cause.

So noble, so pure, that Clay can’t help but blurt out, “What if all hearts are connected in some way?”

“Hmm?” Dr Montgomery hums questioningly. “What do you mean?”

“Like, there’s a collective unconscious, isn’t there?” And the manifestation of this collective unconscious would go by the name of Mementos. Indeed, Mementos *is* everyone’s Palace formed deep in the heart of the most bustling hub in Fariold, Valentine Hills.

“If all hearts share the same things...” Realization and glee dawns on Dr Montgomery’s face. She grabs her clipboard off her desk, scribbling something down on the piece of paper. “Of course! The collective unconscious! How could I have overlooked this?”

Clay would never have thought of this concept, ever, if he was never exposed to the Metaverse.

“If their hearts are shared, then could it mean that their senses are shared as well?” Dr Montgomery rattles off. “Then if I combine this theory with the one I’m verifying and if I link it back to cognitive psience...Thanks so much, Clay. I knew it was worth it bringing this up to you!”

It’s strangely satisfying to see Dr Montgomery sitting back so naturally against her couch, pen moving nonstop. She must have forgotten about his presence for a moment, because she looks up from her work with an apologetic smile and encourages him to take some snacks before leaving.

Clay pockets a small bag of Skittles for himself and a Mars bar for Floris, deciding to leave Dr Montgomery to her musings. If he’s being completely honest, he’d really like to see where her research leads her, and how it could possibly be tied to Mementos and the very existence of the

Metaverse.

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9/18 – FRIDAY – EVENING

“Are you alright?” Clay asks, waving a hand in front of Blade’s face. Blade jerks back, as if burned by fire.

“Just a little...distracted,” Blade mutters, shaking his head. He’s not *just* a little distracted. His shots are mostly off, the white ball bouncing off the walls with less power, knocking fewer balls than he normally would have.

Hell, the most obvious tell is the fact that he’s basically gave Clay the win for two games, and the other six? He won, but just barely.

“You know what? I’m in the mood for pancakes. Let’s go grab some,” Clay says, glancing at his watch. “We’re almost out of time, anyway.”

They return the rented sticks and head out to the crisp autumn air. Already, leaves are turning orange and red, the colours of the sun. Clay’s feet crunch the carpet of leaves, walking over to a small café that he had gone to with Blade a while back. They’ve got a new item on the menu and Clay has been dying to try it.

“So, what’s gotten into you today? I won two games.”

“You got lucky, and I got *unlucky*,” Blade says, sipping at his soda. “That’s all there is to it.”

“You were staring at me, like, half the game. I know I’m kinda hot, but I’m not *that* hot.”

Blade splutters and Clay laughs. One of the first times he’s caught Blade off guard. Oh, good Lord, he’s actually *choking*...

“Never say that to me again,” Blade’s voice is scratchy as he wipes at the corner of his mouth with a napkin.

“I was just joking. But seriously, though, what were you thinking?”

“Nothing,” Blade says, leaning back against his seat. “Absolutely nothing.”

The harried busboy returns with their food, a plate of pancakes for Clay, topped with tons of blueberries and a generous serving of maple syrup, while Blade’s ordered a chocolate cheesecake, the delectable treat dripping with sugary goodness.

It’s a whole lot cheaper than Clay’s too.

The meal is eaten in silence. Clay wants to bring up the subject of the investigation, because looking at the police’s inaction, it seems that it was a failure. Still, Clay wonders if they’ve managed to fool the police totally, or whether they had managed to pin down a single shred of evidence.

“How’s the investigation?” Clay asks, stuffing a forkful of blueberries into his mouth.

“Investigation? Oh, that.” Blade licks at his spoon. “We learned absolutely nothing. Those officers were terribly incompetent.”

Clay figured. Well, at least they are safe for now. He wonders if Mrs Armstrong and Blade would organize a personal investigation into the school. Both of them are observant and smart. Clay isn't sure himself nor the other Thieves won't crack under the pressure.

"Are you going to conduct another investigation?"

"Probably not," Blade says. "Then again, it's up to my partner. She's more experienced and more..." He searches for the right word, cogs whirring loudly in his head as he stares at the half-eaten cake. "More passionate."

"Ah."

"She's been sleeping in the office a lot lately," Blade says. "I would walk in first thing in the morning and there she is, laying all over the couch."

It's true that Mrs Armstrong hadn't been home at all recently. Having been camping out at her office wouldn't be a surprising explanation. It's clear, however, that talking about the investigation has made Blade uncomfortable.

"How's life?" Clay asks, attempting to steer the conversation away from that particular topic.

"Philosophy was never my strong suit."

"I meant, like, how's school and everything."

"Oh." Blade's eyes follow a tiny Pomeranian in the arms of a customer walking by, before snapping back to Clay. "I was never well-liked at school, if that's what you're asking."

"Still receiving death threats?"

"You could say that."

Maybe school life is a tough topic for Blade too. Clay finishes up his pancakes, letting out a content burp. Blade polishes his plate as well, leaving nothing but crumbs and smears of ganache.

"I hope your investigation goes well," Clay says, waving goodbye as Blade ambles down a side street, presumably headed back home, lifting a hand in a wave. He disappears around a corner.

Floris pokes his head out from Clay's bag. "I don't like the way he was staring at you. You think he figured out who we are?"

"I don't think so. If he did, he would have confronted us, right?"

"Maybe he just wants to confirm his suspicions," Floris says. "Either way, we shouldn't let our guard down."

Clay has to agree. He spins on his heels and heads back to the train station. He has no time to dwell on it, honestly. Tomorrow, they are heading into the Palace, and he's got to get some rest.

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Fool arcana rank 4 -> 5 (phantom thieves)

Fortune arcana rank 6 -> 7 (fundy)

Knowledge +2 (answered question correctly)

Councillor arcana rank 4 -> 5 (dr montgomery)

Priestess arcana rank 7 -> 8 (technoblade)

TapL

Chapter Summary

infiltrating lee's space station palace + tapl's kind-of awakening

Chapter Notes

helloooooooooo last day of schoolllllll but then there's reading week and finals week
so.....

this is quite a short chap bc i was celebrating lolll playing minecraft with my fwens
and brother for like 4 straight hours

9/19 – SATURDAY – DAYTIME

“‘Hideout’...I like the sound of that.” Harvey beams.

The Thieves gather around the dining table. There aren’t enough chairs for everyone, so Nick, Zak and George end up standing.

“Okay, so we’re going to have to teach you the basics,” Floris says, sitting on the table. “The basics of working with the Phantom Thieves, that is.”

“You guys steal people’s hearts right? Going into the Metaverse and stuff?” Harvey asks.

“Essentially, yeah,” Clay says. He explains their procedure – finding and securing an infiltration route to the Treasure, which tends to be at the deepest part of the Palace. After which, they will send a calling card so that the Treasure would materialize and they’ll steal it the next day.

“I didn’t really get the last part,” Harvey says with furrowed brows. “About the Treasure materializing.”

“Honestly, that doesn’t really matter,” Nick says.

“Yeah, just know that once the calling card is sent, we only have one day to steal his Treasure or the effect will disappear and we’ll never get another chance.”

“Only one day. Got it.”

“Alright then, let’s go,” Clay says. “We’ll teach you the rest on the way.”

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The space station is as unwelcoming and as emotionless as Dream remembers it. The machines beep continuously without rest, senseless information flashing across the screen.

“Your codename is TapL, right?” Dream asks.

“That’s what Floris calls me.”

“It’s Fundy,” Fundy says. “In the Metaverse, we use each other’s codenames.”

Dream does a quick introduction, stating each of their codenames once in turn.

“Dream, I don’t think we should let TapL on the frontlines for now,” Fundy says. “His Persona isn’t too stable yet. Remember what happened with Eret?”

“Wait, but I can fight though-“ TapL starts, but Dream cuts him off.

“TapL, it’s really dangerous over here,” Dream says, remembering the encounter with the gang of Shadows they had the other day. “Even more dangerous than in Mementos.”

TapL seems to get the hint and pouts, deciding that it’s best not to argue. Dream organizes his team. With him: Fundy, Sapnap and Eret, while Bad, Skeppy and TapL are the backup team. They take the same elevator down to the lower floor, where there are several Shadows on patrol. The team breezes past the weak Shadows, easily making it back to the room with the locked door with the iris scanner.

“Authorised entry for Harvey Lee.” The door slides open, clanking noisily. To their relief, there is only one Shadow waiting on the other end, taken completely by surprise, barely having time to morph into Decarabia before getting entirely obliterated.

“Well, that was easy,” TapL says, resting his bloody axe on his shoulders.

One thing Dream has noticed about TapL is the fact that he’s very quick on his feet. He’s the first to notice the appearance of Shadows as well as being the first to respond, hacking away with his axe gracefully as if it’s simply a prop in an elaborate dance.

Not to mention TapL actually going stir-crazy with the grenade launcher, firing off shell after shell, blasting enemies away...and apart. Well, that kind of enthusiasm is appreciated, albeit a little reckless.

He doesn’t use his Persona much, though. Dream has only ever seen flickers of it, faded pink against the grey walls, tiny spheres of baby pink and purple targeting enemies weak to the element. He can hardly make out the rest of it, though, since it always blinks away too quickly.

The next chamber is empty, a single synthetic plant sitting in the middle, windows to the sides showcasing the emptiness of the outside, the nothingness of space. Clusters of stars dot the black, several planets visible in the background surrounded by belts of asteroids.

“We’re actually in space,” Bad breathes, glancing out the window.

“Yeah.” TapL is entranced by the very view. “You think we can go outside?”

“I wouldn’t want to,” Fundy says. “I don’t think there’s oxygen out there.”

“Besides, it would be freezing,” Eret says.

The team crosses the chamber, reaching the other end, before they are stopped in their tracks by a familiar, sly voice.

“Where do you think you’re going, kitten?”

Dream whirls around, finding Kenneth Samson standing right there by the door from where they entered, flanked by the whirring bodies of robots, creaking and clanking, never once breaking formation. This isn't the real Samson. This Samson is plagued by black flames and a golden sheen in his eye. This man before them is merely a replica, his cognitive self.

"You're still keeping company with this bunch of peasants?" Samson says, voice dripping with distaste. "What would your father say about this?"

"What do you want?" There is no mistaking the waver in TapL's words. He gulps, taking a step back as Cognitive Samson walks closer, arms spread. The robotic servants by his side beeping and clanking. They look so humanoid that it's almost disturbing.

"Isn't it obvious? I want you to come home with me. Cook me dinner, tell me how much of an amazing man I am. Satisfy me in the bedroom," Cognitive Samson says and laughs. "You'd make the perfect spouse, Harvey."

TapL's grip tightens on his axe. Dream unsheathes his dagger. If Cognitive Samson tries anything...

"TapL!" Fundy shouts, alarmed. TapL rushes Cognitive Samson, swinging his axe in a wide arc that takes out the robots easily, slicing them in half and leaving their metallic bodies clunking to the floor, fading away like a Shadow would. He raises his axe again, about to bring it down on Cognitive Samson's head.

Cognitive Samson holds out a hand, a shield of black fire deflecting TapL's strike. TapL stumbles back, both hands curling around the handle of his axe about to rush Cognitive Samson again, only to throw up his arm in defence against Cognitive Samson's growing flames.

"Look at you. So weak." Cognitive Samson sniggers. The fires have grown so intense that it's set him ablaze, leaving only his golden eyes peeking out from the pillar of flames. "You have no worth unless you're with me!"

"I've had enough of you!" A burst of blue energy erupts from TapL's feet, mirroring Cognitive Samson's. His Persona manifests behind him, forming a clearer picture than before, dazzlingly so.

"Get out of my face!" TapL holds out his axe threateningly. His Persona's dress flaring, gesturing in a dramatic wave.

I see you've finally made up your mind, my dear fated prince. Freedom for you must stem from betrayal.

TapL grasps at his head, his axe clanging to the ground as he loses his grip on it.

If you still yearn for it now, then you must not err. Now tell me. Who shall you betray?

"I...I can't let my father continue..." TapL starts, cut off by an amused giggle.

Yes...that gaze! I can finally display my true strength.

Cognitive Samson takes a step back, the pillar of fire peeling back to reveal the hulking figure of a suit of metal, a robot clad in a pristine white suit. TapL grunts, reaching up to his mask and curling his fingers around the edges.

Just as Cognitive Samson is preparing for battle, the rest of the team is as well. They're not letting TapL fight this battle alone. Not any longer.

I am thou, thou art I.

From TapL's Persona's dress emerges a whole arsenal of guns, ranging from pistols to machine guns to bazookas, each aimed at Cognitive Samson.

Let us adorn your departure into freedom with a beautiful betrayal!

TapL rips off his mask, blood spraying from his skin as power rips through the ground. "Milady!"

[Milady](#) titters once more. Before Cognitive Samson can act, bullets decorate his torso, his legs, his everywhere. The gunshots are limitless, firing to the point where Cognitive Samson is hardly anything left, pained voice begging for mercy. TapL himself wields his grenade launcher, eyes narrowed.

Dream sheathes his dagger with a satisfied smile. With the way TapL's handling himself, it seems that the Thieves aren't needed. TapL lets loose the final shot, the grenade landing right in the middle of Cognitive Samson's remains and exploding, sending shrapnel shooting in all directions. A small piece nicks Dream's ear, a sharp sensation of pain slicing through the shell.

By the time the smoke dissipates, Cognitive Samson is nothing more than a pile of scrap metal, fading away into ash.

"That was epic," Skeppy whispers.

Fuelled by emotions alone, TapL's power has skyrocketed. He turns back to the Thieves, a sort of homicidal mania in his eyes. It is gone as soon as Milady is dismissed but Dream is sure that he doesn't want to cross TapL. Ever.

"How was that?" TapL is bleeding from several cuts and nicks across his skin, likely from that final explosion, but he stands ever so proudly, striding over to the Thieves in search of validation.

["Amazing,"](#) Dream says. "I think I'll have to consider putting you on the frontlines. Sapnap, you can take a break."

Sapnap salutes him.

"You really showed him there," Navi says, impressed.

"He's a massive a-hole," TapL says. "Man, that felt really good. Wait." He turns back to the remains of Cognitive Samson, a vanishing clump of ash dissolving into the air. "I didn't just kill the real one, right?"

"That was just a cognitive being, so it would have any impact on the real person," Bad says. "We're good."

TapL grins. "I'm feeling way more energetic than ever now. Let's go!"

Following Dream's lead, the team heads down the next corridor which brings them to a large chamber with a tube in its centre, buttons in the shape of arrows fixed beside a set of doors. It's an elevator. To their left is an important-looking door, the only one glazed silver while the rest are a pure white, albeit with a card scanner similar to ones they've seen in Kris' Palace.

"Okay, so as it turns out, we need a Chief Director's ID card if we want to go through," Navi says, approaching the door. "I can sense the Treasure through here."

“Then we’re just going to have to hunt for him,” Dream says, “and convince him, very nicely, to give us his ID.” Well, that is a pain. They *could* try taking the elevator down...

“Dream! Enemies below us coming up at high speeds!” Navi hisses.

Dream dives behind a crevice between two walls, back pressed flush against it as he listens to the rush of the car, the ding of the elevator, and the clanking of metal feet against the metal floor.

Peeping from cover, he catches sight of a stream of robots with their back to him, walking in a neat row down a corridor. Dream has probably mentioned this already, but their humanoid appearance coupled with their stiff movements is seriously creeping him out.

“Do you think the Chief Director could be downstairs?” Eret asks.

“Maybe,” Dream says. It’s worth a shot. The robots disappear round a corner. The elevator stands totally still, simply *begging* them to ride it.

“Don’t mind if I do.” Dream presses the arrow pointing to the ground and the doors glide open with nary a sound. The rest of the Thieves squish into the elevator and it begins to descend into the depths of the space station.

*

Spaceport of Greed: Infiltration Begin

Chapter Summary

first part of infiltration - finding the chief director

Chapter Notes

well then here's my least liked palace...i wonder how many of u got tricked by morgana's "THE TREASURE IS RIGHT BEHIND THAT DOOR" then got whacked in the face by that flying-through-space puzzle

9/19 - SATURDAY - DAYTIME

The elevator's door open and Dream and Fundy stumble out, taking a large gulp of fresh air. Or, well, air as fresh as a space station can offer. As their group grows larger, they're going to have to start taking turns in the elevators...

The chamber they find themselves in is hexagonal in shape, with several corridors branching out to other rooms.

"I can sense powerful presences in the rooms past this hallway," Navi says, approaching one of the corridors. He frowns. "But they don't seem like they're the Chief Directors..."

"If they're powerful, that could mean that they are figures of authority," Eret says. "They might know something about the Chief Director. We should still try to get some information out of them."

Good idea.

"The thing is, I think they exude the same amount of power but only one of them is the Chief Clerk," Navi says.

"Why not we split up?" Dream asks. "We have two people who are good at analysing enemies, so we can split into two groups and Navi can establish communication between us."

"It would consume a lot of power, but I could try."

"Right then," Sapnap says. "Who's going with who?"

Each team would need someone adept at healing, so Fundy and Bad should be on different teams. Sapnap and Skeppy specialize in physically whacking the Shadows to death, so they should be in separate groups as well. Then there's Eret and Navi, both good at analysis, who should be split. And finally, himself and TapL.

"We'll see you guys back here later," Dream says, stepping off towards the other corridor with Sapnap, Fundy and Navi while Bad, Skeppy, Eret and TapL head the other way.

The corridors are bland, grey wall after grey wall, punctuated by the entrances to several rooms.

“Dream, wait.”

Navi is standing outside one of the rooms, face twisted in concentration. The team pauses outside, privy to the random murmurings from within the room.

“We can listen in on their conversations,” Navi says. “See if they say anything about the Chief Clerk. I’ll beam whatever I’m hearing to you guys.”

“My hip hurts...”

“I hate the Chief Clerk...”

“I never get overtime pay...”

“Wonder if the Chief Clerk will give me a day off if I give him some sweets...”

“Sweets,” Fundy says. “He likes sweets.”

“I’ll communicate this to the rest.” Navi draws up a floating keyboard and begins typing rapidly into it. “Let’s just hope that our Chief Clerk is one for conversation.”

Very soon, they catch sight of an impressive office, no less emotionless than the rest of the station. Robots rush from corner to corner with jerky gaits, oil leaking from their joints. However, what really holds their attention in the middle of the room is a giant robot, spindly limbs dancing as he merely supervises the robots, not even lifting a finger to help.

Dream boldly walks up to him, keeping his weapons hidden.

“WHO ARE YOU?” the robot asks. “AND WHAT’S WITH THOSE FANCY OUTFITS?”

“We’re...uh...salesmen,” Dream says, mind racing for a response.

“SALESMEN?” The robot seems to consider it. “VERY WELL. I WILL HEAR YOU OUT. WHAT HAVE YOU COME TO SELL?”

“We’ve got some confectionaries,” Navi says. “Muffins, cakes...take your pick.”

“CONFECTIONARIES!” the robot, despite being faceless, appears absolutely delighted. “YOU ARE CERTAINLY IN THE KNOW. I SEE MYSELF AS A CONNOISSEUR OF ALL THINGS SWEET.”

That’s their man.

“Navi, get the rest here,” Dream says. “Everyone, prepare for battle!”

“W-WHAT?” the Chief Clerk cries. “SLAVES! PROTECT ME!”

On command, the robots drop whatever they’re doing and rush the Thieves. Dream summons Lachesis, sending a curtain of icicles raining down on the robots, reducing them to chunks of scrap metal.

“Do you know anything about the Chief Director?” Navi shouts over the din of Fundy’s wind sickles and the clanging of Sapnap’s cudgel against steel. Dream shoots a robot that gets too near, the robot collapsing and whirring as it shuts down and disperses into a cloud of ash.

“CHIEF DIRECTOR? NO ONE KNOWS WHO THE CHIEF DIRECTOR IS, BUT THE SECTION CHIEF SHOULD KNOW...” the Chief Clerk rambles. “THINKING ABOUT THE SECTION CHIEF MAKES ME MAD!”

“The Section Chief?” So there’s another rank between the Chief Clerk and the Chief Director?

“HE’S SO WEAK TO NUCLEAR DAMAGE IT’S NOT EVEN FUNNY. IF I CAN GET MY HANDS ON HIM...”

“So the Section Chief is weak to Frei damage...” Navi mumbles. “Dream, this one’s weak to Psi!”

Well, Dream doesn’t have any Persona which knows any Psi skills. That’s going to be a problem. Just as he is about to swap his Persona out, footsteps thunder from behind him, and an arrow of light tinged with purple and pink pierces through the air, stabbing the Chief Clerk in the face. The Chief Clerk howls in pain as the arrow of light fizzles away, leaving a hole in his head in its wake, electricity crackling from the torn wires within.

The Chief Clerk whirrs, grinding to a halt as he collapses and bursts into ash, an ID card slipped into a lanyard lying on the ground.

[“Hope](#) we made it in time,” Eret says.

Dream gives them a thumbs-up. Fundy walks over to the lanyard and picks it up. “We’ve got the Chief Clerk’s ID.”

“We need the Chief Director’s card, though,” Skeppy points out.

“There’s a locked door up ahead,” Navi says, a map appearing in front of him. “I think we can try using the Chief Clerk’s card to get through.”

The card works like a charm, the door beeping and sliding open, letting them pass. The corridors look no different than the ones that they’ve been seeing, lined with the same few synthetic ferns.

“I can sense two powerful presences ahead,” Navi says as soon as they come to another intersection. “But I don’t think either of them is the Chief Director. They’re probably the Section Chief.”

“Section Chief?” Bad asks.

“The Chief Clerk mentioned about the Section Chief, and that the Section Chief is the only one who knows about the Chief Director,” Dream says.

The other door that does not lead to an office is protected by another card reader, which Navi says that they require a Section Chief’s card or higher to be able to access.

“If its layout is how I think it is, then the Chief Director’s office should be behind this door,” Navi says, “which means we’re going to have to find the Section Chief and steal his card.”

“Or beat it to a pulp,” Sapnap says. “I’m ready to go whenever.”

They decide to split up again, each heading down the two different hallways, hiding from the patrolling Shadows till they reach a workroom similar to the one that they had encountered earlier, before confronting the Chief Clerk. There are several working robots within, each one moving so violently spasmodically that Dream fears that they will break at any moment.

Is this how Andre Lee sees his employees? As robots who serve the company till their dying breaths? How inhumane.

“The Section Chief is always so noisy.”

“He always calls us useless even though all he does is supervise.”

“I’m not worthless, Section Chief! Please don’t fire me!”

“He always claims he’s in the right...it’s getting really annoying...”

“So the Section Chief is full of himself, huh?” Sappnap mumbles.

“He’s working them to the bone, but not doing much himself,” Dream says. “Moreover, he calls them worthless. And useless.”

“Alright then, I’ll convey this message to the others,” Navi says, drawing up the same keyboard as he did previously. The rest of the group heads on over to the door at the end of the corridor. The door opens with a click on the button beside it with a whoosh, and Dream steps into an even fancier office with even more robotic servants.

“Ooh, shiny,” Fundy stares at the gold sparkling around them, decorating the office from the ceiling to the floor. The Section Chief must be a rather miserly guy. Speaking of whom, a robot cyan and turquoise from head to toe is yelling at a pair of poor worker robots. Dream almost feels bad for them, if not for the fact that they are merely cognitive beings.

Dream clears his throat, diverting the blue robot’s attention towards them. The two robots he was lecturing seem to display an expression so very close to relief as they scamper off as fast as their creaky joints allow them to.

[“HEY!](#) HOW DID YOU GET IN HERE?” the blue robot asks, voice more jarring than the Chief Clerk’s. “YOU SHOULDN’T BE WANDERING HERE UNATTENDED.”

“Sorry,” Dream says, not apologetic at all. He has to get some information out of this guy.

“I DON’T MEAN TO LECTURE YOU, BUT THIS IS FOR YOUR OWN GOOD. SINCE YOU’RE HERE...” He sizes them up. He has no eyes, but Dream would say that he’s *squinting* at them. “WHAT EXACTLY ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?”

“We’re looking for the Chief Director,” Sappnap says. “Have you seen him around?”

“THE CHIEF DIRECTOR?” the blue robot’s head whirls around, as if attempting to process the information. “WELL, THE CHIEF DIRECTOR DOESN’T HAVE TIME TO SPEND CHATTING WITH THE LIKES OF YOU. PRIVATE TALKS IN THIS OFFICE IS NOT ALLOWED!”

“Well, Dream? Do we fight him?” Fundy asks.

Just then, Dream hears a buzzing sound from behind him.

“Eret?” Navi asks. “You found him? Great. We’ll be right over.”

“FOUND HIM? WHO ARE YOU TALKING TO?” the blue robot, who is, apparently, not the Section Chief, asks.

“Sorry, we have to leave now,” Dream says. “Thank you for your time.”

“GLAD TO BE OF SERVICE. WE AT LEE FOODS STRIVE TO PROVIDE THE BEST FOR OUR CUSTOMERS.”

Well, their best seems to require exploitation of their employees. Dream doesn't want any part of that. He and the team return down the corridor where they came from and travel down the other one, dashing past robots with their back turned and reaching the other important-looking office.

[A battle](#) is already underway. A pink sphere crashes into the wall next to his face. Dream stumbles backwards, eyes wide, Sapnap and Fundy crashing right into him.

“MORE BRATS?” the Section Chief roars. “GET THEM, YOU WORTHLESS SCUM!”

The surrounding robots begin to launch themselves at the new arrivals. Bad manages to burn some to crisps while Skeppy disables even more with his icicle spears.

“He's weak to Frei skills,” Navi says, now encased in Necronomicon's protective shell. “The rest of the robots are weak to Garu!”

“Fundy!” Dream summons Kurama Tengu. Fundy jumps on his shoulder, summoning Zorro.

“Everyone, duck!” Navi shouts.

The rest of the Thieves do as they're told, dropping to the floor as Fundy and Dream fill the room with blades of green accompanied by swirling cyclones, eating up every single robot in its way and spitting it out, as pieces of scrap metal, against the wall. The room is filled with the sounds of clanging and clinking.

[The Section](#) Chief barely manages to survive the onslaught, sat cowering in a corner, the lower half of his body completely destroyed. Eret approaches him and squats down, holding a hand out to him.

“Your ID, please. We need it to find the Chief Director.”

“T-THE CHIEF DIRECTOR WON'T SPEAK TO THE LIKES OF YOU,” the Section Chief whimpers. Skeppy stabs his katana at the floor, the chink of the blade against metal scaring him even more. The Section Chief reaches into a slot in his torso and throws it at them clumsily. TapL catches it expertly.

“PLEASE LEAVE ME ALONE.” There is distinct fear in his voice.

“Is there anything you can tell us about the Chief Director?”

“HER OFFICE IS IN THE NEXT AREA. SHE ENJOYS TALKING ABOUT HER PAST. THAT IS ALL I KNOW.”

“So, we're up against some old coot, huh?” Sapnap says, folding his arms.

“Well, we got his ID,” TapL says, dropping it into Dream's hand. “I think we should go and see what this Chief Director is like.”

As expected, the door opens up to the next hallway, where once again, Navi senses two presences radiating even greater power. Two presences stronger than the ones they've just fought.

By now, the Thieves are running on fumes. The past few battles may not have injured them greatly or been lengthy but it is only because the cost of their skills on their spirit and energy is taking its

toll. After they get the Chief Director's card, they'll return to the real world and call it a day.

"I don't think we should split up this time," Dream says. "Everyone's tired. If any one of us gets caught off guard, we're going to be in deep trouble."

"I agree," Navi says. "Bad, you holding up alright?"

"I'm fine. Just a little...I'm not sure how much strength Carmen has left."

"This Palace stuff is really tiring, not gonna lie," TapL says. "I don't think Fundy and I ever got this tired even when training in Mementos."

"We'll get the Chief Director's card and we'll leave for the day," Dream says. "It's not good to push yourself so hard."

The team agrees and follows Navi's direction down a corridor, headed for a more spacious office with even more robotic servants running about. No, not just running about. There's a robot lying in the corner, sparks flying from wires poking out from his metal body.

Not just one robot, Dream realizes in horror. There are many. Some are picked up and carted out by the other, nearly-malfunctioning robots out of the office and down the corridor. No one seems to care about the approach of the Thieves, which, to Dream, is a good thing.

He walks up to the plump robot in a green suit unopposed, hands tucked into his pockets.

["Are you](#) the Chief Director?" he asks.

The green robot turns, the intensity of her eyeless glare stabbing through him like a knife. "WHO ARE YOU AND HOW DID YOU GET IN HERE?"

"That doesn't matter," Dream says. "Are you the Chief Director?"

"IN MY DAY, YOU COULDN'T JUST STROLL ANYWHERE YOU LIKE. YOUNG'UNS NOWADAYS ARE SO DISRESPECTFUL," the green robot says. Dream shrugs.

"In your day?" Eret asks.

"I WAS THE BEST OF THE BEST," the green robot says. "WHEN I WAS YOUNG, IT WAS NECESSARY TO BE ABLE TO CLIMB ON TOP OF YOUR COMPETITION, YOU KNOW."

She sounds exactly like their Chief Director. Talks a bit too much about her past.

["The robots](#) around her are weak to Garu, but she herself is weak to Psi," Navi says.

"TapL, Fundy, you're up! Everyone, keep the other robots at bay!"

The weaker robots this time don't even put up much of a fight, collapsing as soon as they are hit by a single attack. TapL hurls his axe at the Chief Director, the spinning blade severing one of her arms as she throws them up to defend herself. Her useless arm is flung to the side, dissolving into ash.

TapL summons Milady as Fundy launches him into the air with a vortex of wind, grenade launcher at the ready.

"Say goodbye!" The glint in TapL's eye is terrifying as he sends a shell straight at the Chief Director. The Chief Director doesn't even have time to respond before she explodes into a million

gears, screws and bolts. Her ID card, surprisingly unharmed, is sent flying through the air. Bad dives for it, managing to secure it before becoming TapL's landing pad, letting out an agonized cry.

[“Score!”](#) TapL holds out a peace sign.

“Get off me!” Bad shrieks.

Dream plucks the ID card from Bad's hand as TapL sticks out his tongue, apologizing with a cheeky grin.

“Now that we've gotten the Chief Director's ID, we can go through that door,” Fundy says. “Come on, let's go!”

[The Thieves](#) make the round trip back to the elevator and squeeze into its narrow car. The elevator shoots upwards, the ride back to the higher level smooth.

Dream scans the ID card on the reader of the previously-impassable door. In a flash, the scanner blinks from a piercing red to a calm green. The door slides open, and the first thing that catches his gaze is the expansive void of nothingness that is space.

“Are we going to have to travel through *space*?” Sapnap stares past the glass walls, glowing with excitement.

“Nah,” Navi says. “There's a glass wall all around us.”

Sapnap deflates like a balloon.

“There's a safe room here,” Eret says, already pushing the door. “Shall we head inside?”

[The safe](#) room is no less welcoming than the rest of the Palace, but at least it provides them a safe space where they need not care about Shadows. Dream plops down onto one of the metallic benches, the cold of the metal burning at his thighs. Still, being able to sit down is a great comfort in itself.

“I think we did well today,” Fundy says. “So, um, wanna head back? My fur's getting all mussed up.”

“I'm beat,” Skeppy says. “Like, so very dead.”

“Same here,” TapL says.

“Right then,” Dream says with a tired wave. “Good work everyone. Let's head back for today.”

No Longer A Zero

Chapter Summary

some s links before the next infiltration

Chapter Notes

i have come to the realization that this should have been rated M from the start (granted that the game itself is rated M...) given the themes explored and stuff so i've changed up the rating from T to M

also, happy deepavali/diwali to whomever is celebrating!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

9/19 – SATURDAY – EVENING

“Why are you doing your homework? You should sleep.” Floris paws at Clay’s hand. Clay’s head shoots up, already in a state of stupor. He yawns, cupping his mouth.

“Yeah, Clay,” Nick says with an equally tired yawn. “Fuck homework.”

Clay slumps over his table. “Sleep is for the weak.”

“No it isn’t.” Floris nips at Clay’s sleeve. “Nick, help me get this nitwit to bed.”

“I can’t,” Clay whines, as Nick hoists him up by his middle. “I don’t wanna do homework tomorrow!”

“You can just do it in the morning,” Nick says, grunting, the two of them nearly toppling to the ground. Clay barely stifles another yawn as he is dragged unceremoniously to his bed and tugged by Floris up the stairs.

Within seconds, Clay is out like a light and dead to the world.

*

9/20 – SUNDAY – DAYTIME

“This is one fancy restaurant,” Clay says as he follows Zak through the glass double doors. It is reminiscent of that hotel the Thieves celebrated their first victory at.

It seems that the man they’re meeting, Rossi, is already seated, perusing the menu, when they arrive. He looks up, the lenses of his spectacles glinting in the candlelight. Clay and Zak take their seats opposite him.

“Please, do order whatever you like,” Rossi says, gesturing to the menu laid out before them.

They place their orders and the waitress strides off, leaving the three of them to talk.

“Have you come to a decision?” Rossi asks. “Whether you’d like to join the Foundation?”

“Just wondering what I’d need to do if I did,” Zak says.

“You would just be required to provide your skills as well as to participate in any event we need you to,” Rossi says. “Everything else on the administrative side, we will settle.”

“What kind of events are we talking about?” Zak asks.

“Mainly art exhibitions and interviews. Perhaps even photoshoots,” Rossi says with a small smile. “I can already imagine just how big you’d grow.”

“Wait, what’s this about interviews and photoshoots?”

The waitress returns with their appetizers, three bowls of clam chowder and plates of escargots.

“To sell you, of course,” Rossi says. “Without a little advertisement, people would hardly know who you are.”

“But you can’t just...make art for money! Art should come from the heart,” Zak says, shaking his head. “When money’s involved, the artwork will no longer be pure.”

“Is that so?” Rossi asks. He’s still smiling, like a wise sage advising a disciple. “Sometimes, it’s difficult to separate money from passion. To continue doing what you love, you need money as well. To eat, to have a place to sleep.”

“But...”

“I don’t blame your apprehension,” Rossi says, “but do think about it. Our doors are always open for you.”

As it turns out, Rossi hadn’t intended to stay long, seeing as he didn’t order any entrées or main courses. He leaves the two to their meal and fully pays for it. He bids them farewell and Zak dips his head, chowing down on the delightful lunch.

“This is good stuff,” Zak says, stuffing his face with food.

[“Are you](#) going to accept it?” Clay asks. “The support.”

“To be honest, I’m a little conflicted,” Zak says, finishing his soup and moving on to his plate of pasta. “He’s got a point. A very good point.”

“Art can fill your heart, but it can’t fill your stomach,” Clays says. “When you eventually graduate, you’re going to have to find some way to get some income.”

Zak falls silent. Clay can almost see the battle raging in his mind. The need to survive versus the need to pursue art for the sake of art. In this harsh world they live in, it’s a dilemma that would certainly leave many people unsure. Especially people so dedicated to their craft.

Zak leaves that day with a less-than-enthusiastic farewell. Clay can imagine he’s still thinking about it, the issue turning and tossing about in his head like crashing waves. He leaves Zak to it as they part ways at the station and heads on over to his next appointment...

9/20 – SUNDAY – EVENING

“I only have one new target for you this time,” Yao Yi says, pushing her phone towards him, open up to a forum post regarding a man who sells faked spiritual stones to scam the elderly. Clay confirms the target, and she sends out a warning on the spot.

At that moment, her ringtone chimes.

“Be my guest,” Clay says, taking a sip of his soda.

Yao Yi answers the phone with a frown. “Hello?” The voice on the other end is scratchy, words unintelligible to Clay, who merely fixes Yao Yi with a curious gaze.

Yao Yi stands so fast the chair nearly topples behind her.

“I have to go. Bethany is in trouble,” Yao Yi says.

“In trouble?”

Yao Yi shoots out of the diner, leaving Clay’s question hanging in the air. Abandoning his soda, he rushes out after her. Whatever that sounded like, it isn’t good.

Yao Yi does not get far, turning down several narrower streets. Clay is hot on her heels, the soles of his feet thumping the concrete as he dives down the alleyways, screeching to a halt when he almost bumps into Yao Yi’s back.

A girl Clay remembers as Beth is pinned against the wall, her hands grasping at her throat as she is lifted into the air. She drops her phone, the device clattering to the ground. She is being accosted by a man with a woman standing beside them, a bored expression on her face.

“Pay us back the money,” a woman says, taking a drag of her cigarette, “or Miranda gets it.”

Beth can hardly speak, struggling to breathe.

“Hey! Stop that!” Yao Yi screams at the top of her lungs, her voice shaking ever so slightly. “Let her go!”

“Huh?” the man accosting Beth loosens his grip, dropping her to the ground. Beth coughs, taking large gulps of air. The woman frowns and sashays over to Yao Yi, magenta skirt flouncing around her hips.

“Who are you?” she asks, a second before realization dawns on her. “Are you the friend that Bethany phoned?”

“So what if I am? Leave her alone!” Yao Yi exclaims. She’s trembling like a leaf, fear radiating off her in waves.

“You have nothing on us,” the woman says, puffing smoke out in Yao Yi’s face. “Anyone can see that you’re nothing but a wimp. This woman owes us money for the crack, so if she can’t pay up, her girlfriend’s going to be the one who pays for it, if you catch my drift.”

Yao Yi shrinks under that, and Clay is about to intervene when Yao Yi slips her phone out of her pocket and taps on her screen, shoving the phone in their faces. “I’m taking a video of this whole conversation. If you don’t want me to report you to the police, then you’ll have to let her go.”

“We could just break that phone of yours, you know?” the woman says. She stubs her cigarette out

with a grind of her heel. “Along with your face.”

“My phone automatically backs up the video to the Cloud, so I will have a copy even if you...even if you break my phone. Don’t bother trying,” Yao Yi says, an unexpected surge of confidence in her voice.

“Delete the video now and we’ll let Bethany go,” the woman snarls.

“No!” Yao Yi shakes her head. “You let her go. *Then* I’ll delete both the copies on my phone and the Cloud.”

The woman looks like she wants to argue, but the man places a hand on her shoulder.

“It’s not worth it,” he says. “Let’s just go.”

The woman growls and shoots a glare at Yao Yi, before turning her back to them and stalking off. Beth slides to the ground in relief, a hand still around her throat.

[“Why’d you...help me?”](#) Beth’s voice is breathy, gaze on the ground.

“Then why’d you call?” Yao Yi asks, slipping her phone back into her pocket.

Beth doesn’t answer. She staggers to her feet and pushes past Yao Yi, stopping only at the intersection where one side street meets the next.

“Thanks.”

With that, she runs back down towards the central street. Yao Yi exhales loudly, nostrils flaring and leaning against the damp wall.

“You were really courageous back there,” Clay says. Yao Yi stifles a shriek, eyes wide as she stares at Clay.

“Clay? When did you get here?” Yao Yi asks.

“A while ago. I thought I was gonna have to step in. Turns out I didn’t have to,” Clay says. “You handled that pretty well.”

“I did?” Yao Yi chuckles. “I think I was about to cry halfway through.”

“You still stood your ground. That wasn’t what a zero would have done,” Clay says.

“Oh my God. The leader of the Phantom Thieves praised me...” Yao Yi’s chuckle evolves to a laugh. “I’m not a zero anymore!”

“No you’re not,” Clay says. “I’m expecting a lot out of you, image manager.”

Yao Yi flashes him a smile and a thumbs-up.

*

[9/21 – MONDAY – AFTER SCHOOL](#)

“This will be the last time I’m gonna be teaching you Gun About, big man,” Tommy says, stuffing the controller back into its holster. “So you can celebrate your graduation.”

“I haven’t beaten you yet, though,” Clay points out, also slotting the controller back in place.

“Let’s face it. You’ll never beat me,” Tommy says, shaking his head.

Clay purses his lips, shrugging. “Why the sudden change of heart?”

“Well, you know how I used to be in the Family and shit?” Tommy says, stepping away from the arcade machine. “Well, this gun game was the closest I got to that old life, and it’s...it’s hard to explain.”

For some semblance of his past, perhaps, to adjust to living a civilian life after being ripped from all that he’s ever known.

“But I’ve decided that I’m gonna leave that all behind, so I’m not gonna touch this game anymore,” Tommy says, staring wistfully at the machine. “I’m gonna go hang out with Phil and the Blade. *And* I’ve got lessons with Will anyway.”

“I see,” Clay says, nodding. “I wish you luck, then.”

“We can still come back to the arcade or something,” Tommy says. “Play something else that isn’t Gun About.”

“Sounds good.”

“I’ll message you, then,” Tommy says. He glances at his phone. “Well, crap. I’m supposed to have lessons with Will today and I’m gonna be late.”

“He’s going to rip into you.”

“No he’s not. Will won’t dare because I’ll call Phil.” Then, after thinking about it, he sighs. “Yeah, he probably will.”

“Then get going.”

“No need to get so impatient, Dre.” Tommy waves to him as he runs for the bus, leaving Clay standing outside the arcade.

“Well, he’s one happy kid,” Floris says, poking his head out of the bag. “Speaking of Phil, we need to sell him some stuff.”

Clay nods, ducking down the alleyway and turning the corner, seeing the familiar green letters of Untouchable blinking brightly.

*

[9/21 – MONDAY – EVENING](#)

<Phoenix SC> the trial is happening

<Phoenix SC> soon

<Phoenix SC> on the 11th of November

<Dream> oooooh

<Dream> good luck

<Dream> im sure you can win, though

<Phoenix SC> thanks

<Phoenix SC> my daughter's opened up to me a lot

<Phoenix SC> I'm going to her game on Friday

<Phoenix SC> Her soccer game

<Dream> tell her good luck from me

<Phoenix SC> I will

<Phoenix SC> well then I'll see you after Nov 11th

<Phoenix SC> thank you for all that you have done

<Phoenix SC> I wish you well on your endeavours

*

9/22 – TUESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

Clay taps his fingers rhythmically as he stares at his phone, scanning the Phan-Site for any new requests. Eret is typing frantically on his laptop, eyes focused on the screen. He must be writing yet another proposal or editing meeting minutes. Every now and then, he will glance at his phone, only for his eyes to flick back to the screen when no new notifications have shown up.

“So, uh...is he going to show up or...?” Clay starts.

“He’s late,” Eret says. “I hope he didn’t forget.”

The door creaks open and a boy with shaggy hair and a colourful jacket walks in. Clay remembers him. He’s the boy who was walking towards the strip club when he and Eret investigated during the holidays. He shuts the door quietly behind him.

The boy slumps into the seat opposite them. Clay grimaces. It feels like one of those interrogation scenes out of a crime drama.

“Karl,” Eret says, clasping his fingers. “Thank you for coming to meet us today.”

“I don’t see why we couldn’t have met in the classroom,” Karl says, tugging at a loose strand on his jacket.

“The topic is...touchy,” Eret says. “Karl, why were you going to Bowarrow Street that day? When we saw you?”

Karl tenses. “Why do you wanna know?”

“It’s a matter of grave concern, especially since we cannot have students frequenting such a...such an undesirable location,” Eret says tightly. “You’re not the only person who goes there, right? You mentioned a friend?”

“A friend? Uh...” Karl glances away. “I...uh...didn’t. I saw an advertisement and...um...”

“There’s no need to hide, Karl,” Eret says. “I won’t tell the teachers.”

Karl doesn’t look too convinced. “I’m not lying. I didn’t learn about it from anyone.”

He won’t tell them the truth, no matter what they say. Clay is sure of that. However, Karl is their only lead at this point and if they give up now...

“Karl, by wearing that uniform, you carry the name of our school...”

“It’s always the name with you, isn’t it?” Karl says, suddenly hostile. Even Clay is taken aback.

“All you care about is your own reputation. You just want to be the star student who gets straight As and your letter of recommendation, aren’t you?”

“What...whatever are you talking about?” Eret blinks, confused.

“You don’t care about us. All you want is for us to act like the good little students that we are,” Karl says, voice trailing off, as if suddenly realizing that he’s crossed a line. “It’s just...I need that money, and it’s not like I’m doing anything illegal.”

“I care about the students. That’s why-“

“I...I have to go,” Karl says, rising and grabbing his bag and sees himself out before either of them can say anything. The click of the shutting door resounds throughout the otherwise-silent room.

Eret is staring at his hands.

“You do care about the students, don’t you?” Clay asks. “You always make sure the events are running smoothly, you help take care of administrative stuff around the school...”

“What if he’s right?” Eret turns to Clay, torment in his expression. “I tell myself that I care about the student body, but...” He wrings his hands. “But what if I don’t?”

Clay presses his lips together. Eret sighs.

“Sorry. I think I need some time to think about this,” Eret says. “I’ll lock up, so don’t worry about that.”

Clay nods. He wishes he can offer some words of encouragement, but he can find none. None that don’t sound like platitudes, that is, which is probably what Eret doesn’t want to hear right now.

He leaves Eret to his thoughts, exiting the room with a soft goodbye and a “Don’t think too hard about it.” before heading out the door and the school gates.

*

9/22 – TUESDAY – EVENING

“Sparkly.”

Clay watches as the twins stare at the rows of glimmering carats of diamonds displayed behind the glass panel. Clay himself is enamoured by a display of emeralds and jades. He’s not sure whether they’re real gems, but for the price they’re asking, they’d better be.

“Hey, lady!”

Clay’s eyes nearly pop out of his sockets as he whirls around, recognizing Caroline’s voice

instantly. The shop attendant is as startled as he is, but regains her composure quickly, confirming the diamond ring that Caroline wants.

“W-Wait, no!” Clay rushes over. He doesn’t have that much money on him now. Not even with the extra cash from the Metaverse. There’s no way he can pay for diamond ring *that* big!

“What?” Caroline sulks.

“Is there a problem, inmate?” Justine asks.

“I don’t have that much money on me now,” Clay mutters. He apologizes to the shop attendant profusely, much to her amusement, and proceeds to lead the clueless twins outside.

“Why do we need money?” Caroline asks. Something about her reminds Clay of Tommy, for some reason.

“Because people want something in exchange for giving you stuff,” Clay says. “If she found out you don’t have money on you...”

“I see,” Justine says, nodding. “As it turns out, people seem to place an arbitrary value on items, and this arbitrary value is measured by pieces of paper distributed by the governing body?”

“Something like that,” Clay says. “So they want money in return for their wares.”

“To get anything, you need money?” Caroline pouts. “And if having a lot of money is so valuable, why don’t people just hoard it?”

It’s easier said than done. He’s grateful that his needs are all taken care of by the Armstrong household, providing shelter, food and other basic necessities, but there are some people out there who cannot even afford those.

“Because the world is...unfair,” Clay settles for saying. “Some people have a lot of money, but some people don’t even have a single cent. Sometimes, it’s not easy to just hoard money.”

Caroline stares at the floor, contemplating those words.

“How do you obtain money?” Justine asks.

“Well, people have to work,” Clay says. “It depends on the type of job, too. Some jobs pay more, and some jobs pay less. Depends on how long you work too.”

“People contribute their talent and in return they are given money to spend on whatever they want. I understand,” Justine says, nodding. Well, it would be too much of a hassle to explain taxes to the twins right now, so Clay keeps his mouth shut.

“Humans really are pitiful creatures sometimes, huh?” Caroline says, folding her arms.

Justine hums, striking something off her checklist, tucking her clipboard under her arm. “It seems that you have completed yet another assignment, inmate. Well done.”

“Not too shabby.” Caroline nods. “Guess you’re taking your rehabilitation really seriously now, inmate?”

Honestly, he feels more like a babysitter than an inmate actually participating in any form of rehabilitation. Caroline and Justine are truly infants when it comes to the ways of their human society, and it’s up to Clay to keep them out of any trouble.

He ends up escorting the twins back to the Velvet Room and decides to head on home. He has a big day tomorrow at the Palace...

*

Chapter End Notes

knowledge +3 (studying)
star arcana rank 6 -> 7 (skeppy)
moon arcana rank 8 -> 9 (yao yi)
death arcana rank 8 -> 9 (tommy)
hermit arcana rank 8 -> 9 (phoenix sc)
proficiency +3 (crafting)
emperor arcana rank 4 -> 5 (eret)
aeon arcana rank 6 -> 7 (justine and caroline)

Spaceport of Greed: Infiltration Middle

Chapter Summary

that part with the moving mechanical hands (x2, x5 x10 speed u know the one)

Chapter Notes

was watching green guardians this mcc and i srsly love the chemistry between them :))

9/23 – WEDNESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

Dream throws furtive glances around, signalling to the rest of the Thieves when the coast is clear. The eight of them pile out of the safe room and back where they had finished infiltration on Saturday. To be honest, they haven't advanced much into the space station. They just got really, *really* side-tracked.

"The Treasure is past that tower over there," Navi says, pointing at said building in the distance. They are separated by a massive glass dome housing many building complexes in a shape that reminds Dream of mushrooms. They appear interconnected with many branches of corridors stemming from each complex.

"There's a door here," Skeppy says, having gone down a staircase and finding a door. However, there does not appear to be a card or iris scanner. Jiggling the knob yields no results.

"Over here!" TapL calls from the glass wall at the far end, pushing a glass door open and stepping out into the dome. He glances around, eyes lighting up when he sees a hovering platform of sorts, a control panel with countless buttons and levers affixed to it.

Unlike the elevator, the platform is spacious, clearly meant for transporting all manner of robots and large machinery. Navi operates the control panel, guiding the hovering platform past the tops of the complexes, sailing over the patrolling drones.

"We're so high up," Fundy crouches at the edge, watching the buildings pass by beneath them.

"One wrong move and we're dead," Sapnap says. "And I seriously don't want to fall again."

Skeppy sniggers. Then, Eret lifts his head, drawing his revolver.

"Shadows!"

Dream follows Eret's gaze, noticing immediately a swarm of drones headed straight for them, their eyes tinged red. Dream manages to shoot a couple of them down, the machines bursting into ash.

Some, however, are luckier than others.

A drone morphs mid-flight, Mothman bursting forth and whipping up a storm of electricity. Dream

switches from Lachesis to Belphegor, hissing only when the sparks burn at his skin. A quick round of gunshots from Bad takes down most of the Mothman, knocking them into the empty space below.

Sapnap slices a Decarabia in two, its remains scattering into ash.

“Oh crap!” The platform jerks suddenly. Dream is nearly catapulted off, if not for Navi slamming his palm against the joystick. The platform swerves to the right.

The violent movements force the Mothman and Arahabaki to leave them alone for just a split second before a flash of cyan catches Dream’s eye. The stray Frei sphere from a lurking Kaiwan upturns the platform, hurling all the Thieves high into the air.

Navi hops into Necronomicon, safe in its shell. Skeppy is the first to craft an icy slide. Fundy rights himself with a vortex of wind, propelled by Bad’s raging flames. Eret and Sapnap are quick to act, grappling hooks flying from their wrists and latching onto the roof of a complex. TapL and Dream hurl their Ender Pearls towards the tower, breathing collective sighs of relief when their feet touches solid metal.

“Run!” Dream shouts and begins to sprint, leaping over the tops of the complex roofs with TapL, Eret and Sapnap in tow. Meanwhile, Skeppy and Fundy clear the way with their combined power, generating a hailstorm that sweeps the drones away. Bad casts a wall of flames behind them, keeping most of the drones out while the Thieves on the ground dash ahead.

The tower is in sight. Just a few more steps...Dream throws himself off the roof, arms and legs flailing. He rolls forward upon hitting the ground, joined by Skeppy, Fundy and Bad.

“Enemies on the ground, Dream!” Navi shouts.

Bad keeps the drones in the air at bay with a blazing barrier as Fundy fans the flames, the gusts of wind keeping the fire alive. Skeppy and Dream deal with the enemies on land, temperature dropping drastically as Goemon and Lachesis spear any approaching Shadows with lances of ice.

Eret is the first to make it, followed by Sapnap, both hitting the ground with ease.

TapL crashes into Sapnap, something black and wriggling latched onto his foot. He hacks at it with his axe, ripping the Shadow in two. The Shadow screeches and vanishes, with Sapnap dropping a lightning bolt where it once stood for good measure.

At Dream’s command, they cut through the crowd, making straight for the entrance to the tower. Upon noticing a card reader next to the door, Dream fumbles with the Chief Director’s card from his pocket. He slams the card against the reader and the door slides open, clanking as it reveals an empty chamber, a distorted door right in front of them.

“In here!” Dream barrels into the door, pain shooting up his shoulder as he stumbles into the room. The rest of the Thieves pile in, with Skeppy yanking the door shut behind him. Apart from their laboured breaths, the only sounds they can hear are the chitters and clunks of the Shadows outside, unable to enter the safe room.

[“That](#) was epic,” TapL says, picking himself off the ground, hobbling over to a bench. Bad and Fundy tend to their wounds, while Dream passes around boxes of bandages, healing creams and ointments.

“I think we have, uh, very different definitions of epic,” Navi says, taking the seat opposite Dream. He pulls up a map, revealing a swarm of red dots congregating right outside the safe room.

“Let’s wait for the Shadows to leave,” Navi says, finger hovering over the screen. “Oh, and there’s a vent in the corner there. It’ll take us back to the entrance.”

“That’s handy,” Bad says. “Then we can go back whenever we want from here.”

“How’s everyone feeling?” Dream asks.

“I’m good,” TapL says, squinting through the barrel of his grenade launcher.

“I’m fine too,” Bad says, fixing up the scrapes on Skeppy’s arm.

“Then let’s continue after the, uh, the Shadows leave,” Dream says. “Till then, everyone get some rest.”

*

[“All clear. Let’s go.”](#)

Dream’s main team consists of Bad, TapL and Skeppy now, with Eret, Fundy and Sapnap taking up the rear. There is a door to their right, with a sign saying “Export Line” above it, which opens with the Chief Director’s card. The group steps into the massive area, conveyor belts carrying tons of machine parts, tended to by mechanical cranes.

As expected, Shadows patrol this area too. However, they look different this time. Dream will even go so far as to say that they appear...much stronger than before. Security is tighter here.

It would probably be in their best interests not to get caught.

“We’re going to have to navigate past the Export Line,” Navi says. “Then we can get to the Production Line at the other end.”

The gate that Navi is referring to is just across the metal walkways along the conveyor belts and mechanical cranes. For machines, they look so tired, so jerky, that Dream fears one of them would break soon.

“What are we waiting for, then?” TapL says, already heading down the walkway with Skeppy. Dream follows him, bypassing one of the mechanical arms when all of a sudden, a shadow looms over him.

“Dream!” Navi shouts. A weight knocks him to the side, crashing into a couple of crates. He snaps his head towards the booming noise – a crane has just unloaded a stack of crates where Dream was standing. Had Navi been one second too late...

“Are you okay?” TapL asks. Dream takes Navi’s offered hand and pulls himself to his feet.

“I’m fine.”

Turning back to the debris strewn all over the floor now – the broken crane has joined the pile – Dream realizes that they’re separated from the rest of the team, unless they can clear the debris or find some way to cross it.

Unfortunately, Dream does not have the time to contemplate. At TapL’s shout and the crack of ice, Dream spins on his heels to find a gargantuan elephant creature wielding a sword, decked in gold and silver, gems hanging off every appendage of its body.

[Dream](#) unsheathes his dagger, ducking under Skeppy’s beam of ice and rushing it.

“Um...the Shadow is Ganesha and it's weak to...Psi!” Navi cries.

“TapL!”

TapL summons Milady, sending a barrage of pink spheres at Ganesha. Ganesha deflects the attack with a mighty swing of his sword, reflecting the cluster back at them. Dream switches immediately from Kaiwan to Legion before a pink sphere hits him in the stomach, hurling him back. Dream crashes to the ground, stinging from where he was struck.

Necronomicon stabs its tentacles into the ground, spreading a carpet of green. Dream's fatigue melts away and he cocks his pistol, blasting a bullet straight through Ganesha's chest. Ganesha bellows, planting its sword into the ground, ripping up the metal chunks beneath their feet, the shockwave crunching and crushing strips of metal, threatening to throw them off and onto the conveyor belts.

Skeppy mirrors Ganesha's move, slamming his blade into the ground, freezing the metal in place, giving them a platform to stand – albeit a slippery one. Dream and TapL manages to gain traction, the two of them summoning Kaiwan and Milady.

An enhanced rain of Psio spheres is more than enough to reduce Ganesha to a pile of ashes this time. Dream's chest heaves as he dismisses Kaiwan. Glancing around and ensuring that there are no more enemies nearby, he turns back to the pile of rubble, Bad's voice distinct from the other end.

[“Are](#) you guys okay?”

“We're fine!” Dream hollers back. Except now they're separated. He turns to Navi. “Is there a way that we can meet up?”

Navi is already on it, poring over a holographic map of the area, blinking red dots moving in predictable patterns. “I'm seeing a couple of ways...but we would need to somehow fly over the conveyor belts.”

Dream glances over at the belts. They're as wide as canals, transporting big pieces of dangerous-looking equipment. Even if they are somehow able to find a way across, he wouldn't want to endanger the lives of his comrades.

“Dream, we have to leave,” Eret calls from the other side of the wall. “The Shadows are coming. We'll try to meet you at the Production Line.”

With that, Eret's voice disappears, and Dream is left with the sound of battle. He prays that the Thieves would be safe with all his heart, and he turns back to the other three stranded on this side with him.

“No time for dawdling,” Dream says, mustering up that leader voice of his. “If they say they're going to meet us on the other side, then they're going to meet us on the other side.”

“I can communicate with them remotely,” Navi says. “Although not so smoothly if we're further away.”

“As long as we can talk to them, I think we should be fine,” TapL says. The team turns back to the vast distance before them, the droning of machines grating their ears.

“What are these parts for, anyway?” Skeppy asks, edging nearer the conveyor belt and inspecting the intricate components. Dream has never seen any of these in his life.

“Maybe Lee is building something,” Navi says.

Just then, TapL shouts from ahead, standing by a beeping device, lined with strips of blinking blue light. Dream taps the Chief Director’s card against the ID scanner beside it and the machine springs open, revealing a control panel.

“This is *my* thing,” Navi says, nudging Dream away and scanning the lines of words, typing lines of code with the holographic keyboard. Honestly, Dream has always admired the way Navi works, processing the large amounts of information thrown his way and coming up with the best solution for their team.

“Dream? Are you listening?” Navi waves a hand in front of his face, jolting Dream from his trance. He blinks.

“Yes.”

Navi makes a face. “So, the only thing I can do on this is to increase the speed of the cranes. The thing is, this machine controls the blue-coloured crane, so if we want to control the other cranes, we’re going to have to find similar control panels.”

Dream glances around. The crane closest to them would be the blue one, while the yellow and purple ones lie further down the conveyor belt. What will increasing the crane speed do anyway?

“I see. What’ll happen if we increase the speed?”

Navi shrugs. “We’ve gotta try and find out. We can increase it by two times, five times and ten times.”

“Ooh, let’s do ten times! I wanna see what happens,” Skeppy says, eyes glinting with mischief.

“Ten times, then,” Dream says.

Navi taps the command and the crane begins to whirr even louder, jerking as if it’s having a seizure, before promptly collapsing, arm stretched across the conveyor belt. The machine parts pass peacefully under it, its collapse not affecting the transport at all...mostly.

“The machines are so overworked that increasing their speed would cause them to collapse immediately,” Navi says, thumbing at his chin. “This must be how Lee treats his customers...”

TapL remains silent and walks up to the motionless crane. It’s wide enough to act as a bridge... perhaps they could cross to the other side this way? In any case, it’s a dead end ahead. Maybe they could meet up with Sapnap and the others.

“Come on,” Dream says, following in TapL’s lead. “Let’s go.”

*

“Eret? Can you hear me?” Navi asks aloud. From the sounds of it, long-distance conversation seems to work well. “Where are you guys?”

The yellow crane falls onto the belt as the blue one did and the crew crosses it, running right into a patrolling drone. Fortunately, TapL takes it out with a wild swing of his axe. The Shadow bursts into ash.

“You’ve already made it?” Navi sighs, shaking his head. “I think there should be a safe room

there...Okay, wait for us there.”

“Did they go through a secret shortcut or something?” Dream mutters bitterly. The purple control panel is in sight.

“Maybe,” Navi says, glancing at his map, then droops like a wet dog. “Yeah. They doubled back. There’s actually a vent above that can drop them right at the other side.”

“Oh, and we’re stuck here. Excellent,” Skeppy drawls. He whistles triumphantly as he sends an icy spear sailing through the air, piercing the patrolling Shadow’s rotund body. The Shadow dissolves into ash.

“It’s not that bad. At least we can get stronger,” TapL says, trudging forward. The purple control panel isn’t too far away. They reach the end of the walkway and manipulate the purple crane, causing it to break down and collapse, sparks flying from exposed wires along the sides of its body.

[They reach](#) the safe room, pronto, where Bad, Sapnap, Fundy and Eret are already resting inside. Dream shivers as a chill hits him. The air conditioner is incredibly cold here.

“It’s good that you’re safe,” Bad says, he and Fundy striding up to them. “You’re not hurt, are you?”

“Nope,” Dream says, settling into a musty rolling chair that creaks under his weight. Navi takes the seat beside him, trembling ever so slightly as he wraps his arms around himself.

“Are you cold?” Skeppy asks.

Navi shoots him a look. “No.”

Dream shrugs his coat off and drapes it over his shoulders, hands moving before he even thought about. It is only when Sapnap and Fundy exchange knowing smiles that Dream realizes what he just did.

“Thanks,” Navi mumbles.

“Bad, I’m cold too,” Skeppy whines, sidling up to him. “Bad! I’m cold!”

Bad snaps his fingers and a tiny flame appears in front of Skeppy’s face like a will-o-wisp, nearly razing his hair. Skeppy screams, and the Thieves laugh.

“How’s everyone?” Dream asks.

“Kinda tired,” TapL says. “We did all that movie action stuff, then got lost and trapped in a maze and fought thousands of Shadows...”

Dream cups his mouth as he fails to suppress his yawn, eyes squeezed shut, tired tears forming at the corners of his eyes.

“I think it’s time to leave,” Bad says. “Dream’s tired.”

“Yeah, and we’re only about halfway through,” Navi says. “It’s not good to push ourselves.”

“There’s an emergency exit here.” Eret gestures to a door at the far end of the room, the green emergency exit sign illuminated above it. “Navi, does this take us back to the entrance?”

Navi consults his map, the tips of his fingers peeking out from under Dream's coat. "Yes. It does. It was locked, but now that we have the Chief Director's card, we can unlock it from this side."

"We can return to this safe room the next time we begin our infiltration, then," Fundy says.

"We'll come back soon," Dream says. "Till then, everyone should get some rest."

"We still have a lot of time," Eret says. "Just slightly under a month."

"Right then," Dream says, catching the coat that Navi throws back at him. He slips it on, relishing in the thought of Navi wearing his coat there for a moment. He should have caught it on camera... that is, if their phone cameras worked in the Metaverse. He turns the knob of the door to the emergency exit. It opens up to a dark, narrow passageway that seems to go on forever. "Let's leave."

*

Arrival of Autumn

Chapter Summary

more s links

Chapter Notes

good lord we're moving into october (in-fic not irl) already! october's when shit starts happening.

also as u can tell im hurriedly spamming the councillor arcana right now god i spaced it out too much already

Spoilers for dream smp:

welp the l'manburg war's tomorrow (for me) and im hella excited! can't wait to see who the traitor is tbh i wonder if there's even a traitor at all...

just watched fundy's pranking vid and omg those buttons have nothing to do with the tnt

also, i think the pet war has ended for good this time! sapnap and tommy roleplay A+! that ending really got me though... ToT

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

9/23 – WEDNESDAY – EVENING

“What is that?” Floris squints at the title as he lays beside Clay on the bed. “A book on speed runn-reading?”

Clay rubs at his eye. “Yeah.”

“Speed reading for dummies,” Floris reads. “Why’d you need to read faster?”

“To, um, spend less time doing homework? I can get through my textbooks way quicker.”

“Figures.” Floris curls up next to him, letting out the loudest yawn Clay’s ever heard from him. His whiskers twitch, tickling at Clay’s cheek as Clay thumbs the last page of the book and gives in to exhaustion. He places the book down on the shelf and drags himself up to switch the lights off.

Nick is already fast asleep, curled up under his blankets with his face turned towards the wall. Clay stumbles over to the switch and flips it, bathing the room in darkness.

Clay is asleep before his head even hit the pillow, dreaming of robots and whirring machines and the boundless black of space.

*

9/24 – THURSDAY – MORNING

“Is that...the Three Musketeers?”

“Yeah,” Clay says. “I found it in the library.”

This substitute teacher’s lesson is pretty relaxed. She lets them do whatever they want while she minds her own business as well. Clay loves these kinds of teachers; he gets to do whatever he wants.

“Ooh, that’s Harvey’s Persona,” Floris says, blinking as he sits in Clay’s lap, reading along with him. Less reading and more mulling over the illustrations, more like.

“That’s Milady.”

“Yeah,” Floris says.

Soon, the bell overhead rings, and Clay packs up his things to head to his next class.

*

9/24 – THURSDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

Niki isn’t here today. The door’s locked when Clay tries the knob. That’s strange. She’s usually very enthusiastic about the club. Did she fall sick? Or did something happen?

“Maybe you should call her,” Floris says, and Clay does just that. He fishes his phone from his pocket, noticing the indication light flashing from an incoming message.

Niki: I won’t be at club today

Niki: I think club will have to resume next week...

Niki: I’m really sorry

Sent about an hour ago. That must have been when school let out for her. Clay leans against the door to the club room, firing back a couple of messages.

Me: no worries

Me: are you doing ok?

Niki does not reply immediately. Clay decides to head home. He isn’t sure where Niki stays, but he knows that she lives in his neighbourhood. If he’s lucky, he may bump into her on the way back...

*

Clay picks out a loaf of wholemeal bread, throwing it into his basket before heading off to find the

next item on the grocery list Mr Armstrong sent to him. Canola oil...corn flour...oh, he's got those already...

"I think that's all," Floris says. "Come on, let's go and pay."

Clay walks up to the cashier, placing his basket on the counter, before realizing exactly who he is looking at.

"Niki?"

"Clay! I didn't think that you would come here!" Niki's eyes light up in mild surprise as she moves to scan and bag his items. Funny how Clay has never seen her working here before.

"Yeah, well, I'm the errand boy," Clay says, gesturing to the pile of items on the counter.

"I see," Niki says, nodding.

"Have you been working here long?"

"No, this is my second day," Niki says, shaking her head. She rings up his purchase and the number flashes on the screen. Clay hands her the money.

"Why the sudden...uh, job?"

"Oh, because I need money right now," Niki says.

"Money? For what?"

"Oh, um..." Niki looks uncomfortable. She drops his change into his palm. "For my mother. She needs money to buy alcohol."

"She can't pay for it herself?"

"Not exactly..." Niki bites her lip. "Our savings have been drying up because of her alcohol consumption..."

"Have you tried getting her to go to rehab?"

"I've considered asking, but I don't think she'd agree," Niki says, sighing. "And when she's not happy, or when she doesn't get her alcohol...she gets...violent."

Her last word does not drip with venom nor hate. Rather, there is only anguish and sorrow, Clay swallows thickly. Niki genuinely cares for her mother, despite all that she's done to her. If her mother is unwilling to change, then...

"What's your mother's name? Full name."

"My...mother's name? It's Mia Schneider." Niki blinks. "What are you going to use it for...?"

"Nothing," Clay says, shrugging. "Just curious."

"Huh." Niki hands him his bags of groceries. "I think I would be coming back to club next week... if I can switch my shifts around a little...I'll see you then, Clay."

Clay bids her a farewell as he leaves the store.

“We should do something about her mother,” Floris says. “Pulling her daughter out from her school activities to support her drinking problem? That’s messed up.”

Clay agrees. Now he just has to bring this problem up to the rest of the Thieves and find some time to head into Mementos.

*

9/24 – THURSDAY – EVENING

“I wish I can talk to my brother again,” Clay reads off the post-it note authored by a little boy ten years of age, named Timothy, according to the small writing at the corner of the paper.

Still, it never hurts to check. Ant, as per usual, waits outside, eyes never leaving Clay as Clay sticks the note back onto the board.

It may be just Clay, but Ant seems a little, pardon the pun, *antsy*. Ant struts along a familiar stretch of pavement, the little uphill slope no obstacle to it. Clay knows this place. It’s Creek Walk, and the only thing of note there is...

Clay pushes open the creaky gates leading to the cemetery. Since the sun is still up, it’s still open, with several people visiting or paying respects. Ant walks determinedly down the rows of graves, climbing up a crumbly stone staircase up the hill.

This side of the cemetery is quiet, the cypresses of trees surrounding the cemetery as silent as can be. The atmosphere is eerie, as if a ghost could just jump out at them at any moment.

Clay’s heart is in his mouth, momentarily, when he catches sight of a pale boy squatted by a gravestone. Ant meows and sits in the middle of the path, licking at its paw.

“Is that the boy?”

Ant doesn’t answer. Even so, Ant must have brought him here for a reason, right? Clay musters up his courage, praying that the boy is not a poltergeist, and walks up to him.

The crack of a twig beneath Clay’s feet alerts the boy to his presence. The boy’s head snaps up, eyes wide as saucers, before regaining what must have been the somber expression he was wearing before Clay startled him. He stands, gaze not meeting Clay’s.

“Are you...” Clay asks, the words caught in his throat. This doesn’t seem like a good time to be talking about that request right now. “Are you Timothy?”

The boy’s eyes widen. “How do you know that?”

“You put up a request on the board at the church, right?” Clay asks.

“Oh, uh...” Timothy scratches his head. “Yeah. That was just half a year ago, though.”

This is a request that Clay can’t seem to be able to help him with. “Your brother...”

“He’s not actually my brother. It’s just that he helps out at the orphanage from time to time, and now he’s gone, so-”

Timothy seems to have noticed something, looking past Clay. In an instant, as quickly as Clay blinks, Timothy’s expression darkens, followed by a low growl in his throat. Clay glances down at the sudden rub of fur against his legs, only to find Ant huddling beside him, ears pressed back

against his head.

“Why’s that cat here? Get away from it!” Timothy cries, edging backwards.

“What’s Ant done?” Clay asks, moving to pick it up, cradling Ant in his arms. Everyone’s been calling Ant the devil. While it may be true that there has been several hiccups when fulfilling the first two requests, there is no way a helpful cat like Ant could ever cause someone’s death.

“That cat was...it killed our brother!” Timothy appears more afraid than angry. “That cat was there when the accidents happened. It was there!”

Accidents? Ant flinches at the mention of it.

Something seems to click in Clay’s head. “Was your brother Velvet?”

“Yeah, and that cat killed him!”

There’s no point arguing at this point if Timothy is this scared. Ant seems to take comfort in Clay’s presence, burrowing as deeply as it can into Clay’s chest. Perhaps Clay should do some digging into this...this Velvet’s death. Timothy mentioned accidents, but it’s not possible that *Ant* caused the accidents now, isn’t it?

He leaves the cemetery that day with a relieved Ant in his arms. No wonder Ant had been jittery and apprehensive about this request. It came from someone who blames it for the death of someone it was extremely close to. If Clay had been in Ant’s shoes, he wouldn’t know how he’d handle it.

That night, Ant leaves the house through the window, heading out for a walk. Clay lets it, knowing that it probably needs some time alone. He leaves the window open, though, just in case Ant decides to come back before they’re awake...

*

9/25 – FRIDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“I would like to hear your opinion on the Phantom Thieves of Hearts.”

Clay raises a brow. Floris wriggles about in his bag.

“What about them?” Clay asks, taking a sip of his Ceylon tea, eyeing Dr Montgomery who sits opposite him on her comfy armchair.

“They’re the new big thing now, aren’t they?” Dr Montgomery says, pen in one hand, clipboard in the other. “They claim to steal the hearts of criminals and causes them to confess their crimes.”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve taken a little bit of an academic interest in them, you could say,” Dr Montgomery says. “Maybe it’s because my research and how they work are rooted in the same principles.”

“You really are dedicated, huh,” Clay says, placing his empty teacup back onto its saucer with a soft clink. “Though, what makes you say that?”

“About the same principles?” Dr Montgomery asks. She begins scribbling something down in her clipboard. “Well, there’s the matter of their methods. They send out a calling card before they steal a target’s heart, correct? Well, they did say that they could steal our ‘desires’. I wonder how that

could have been done.”

“As in, removing them?”

“Removing them...like they’re concrete objects rather than abstract ideas?” Dr Montgomery says, leaning back against the armchair, staring at her clipboard inquisitively. “Perhaps if there was a physical proxy for the desires...” She lifts her head, meeting Clay’s eyes. “Do you remember the experiment with the cookies?”

Clay nods. “Yes.”

“Well, people’s desires actually changed the way they tasted them. I think we can look at this the same way.”

Clay reaches for a strawberry-flavoured box of Pocky on the table. “In what way?”

“Well, desires influence our cognition very powerfully, you know,” Dr Montgomery says. “For instance, if your desire for the cookies is gone, then your perception of them would be skewed back to normal.”

“Just like the change of heart?” Clay asks.

“Exactly!” Dr Montgomery claps her hands together with a bright smile. “What if the Phantom Thieves’ thefts of hearts are something less metaphorical and something more direct? Well, we still don’t know how they steal these desires, per se, but if desires can be manifested into a physical form, then it stands to reason that they can be taken away as well.”

She’s spot-on. *Too* intuitive, Clay thinks.

“Perhaps even a world that appears based on the desires of people. Now that would be a sight to behold,” Dr Montgomery continues, sounding awfully excited. Once more, she jots down some notes on her clipboard. “If such a world exists, then the Thieves would be able to steal desires just like they would any Treasure...”

“Well, it’s certainly possible.” She wouldn’t be able to confirm that such a world exists. As long as she cannot prove its existence, no one would believe her anyway.

“Right!” Dr Montgomery’s voice quivers. She can hardly sit still, her foot tapping the floor rhythmically. “I think I can finish my research paper now! I’m on the last stretch!”

Clay forces a smile. He cannot risk her finding out about the Metaverse. Even without some form of guidance, like Fundy in his case, she’s managed to come up with that theory all by herself, based almost purely on observations and conjecture.

He wishes her the best of luck, returning her enthusiastic greeting with his own and he steps out of the counselling room.

“That was crazy,” Floris says, poking his head out as soon as they’re outside the school gates.

“Tell me about it. I was so scared that she was on to us for a moment there.”

“Well, she still doesn’t know about you, so that’s a good thing,” Floris says. “We’ve got to be a little more careful around her from now on.”

9/25 – FRIDAY – EVENING

“Ideas, guys! Ideas!” Zak cries.

“For what?” Nick asks, yawning.

“My next piece!” Zak says. “I’m gonna enter a competition!”

“What competition?” Clay asks.

“An art competition. Don’t be an idiot,” Zak says. “So what should my next piece be?” His face appears large on Clay’s laptop screen, and Clay physically jerks his head backwards.

“You called a Zoom meeting to ask us for inspiration?” Eret says, looking rather bored, twirling his pen between his fingers, what appears to be textbooks spread out on his table.

“Well, yes! Who else was I supposed to call?”

“Don’t you have any art friends or something?” Harvey asks.

“Uh, no! You guys are my only friends!” Zak must have loathed to admit that, but it makes Clay feel all the more special. “So please act like my friends and give me suggestions!”

“Where’s Darryl?” Clay asks.

“You know his best friend? Yeah, he’s sending him off tonight. Or something,” Zak says before slamming his fists on the table. “Wait, wait! We’re not talking about him now!”

“Even though you’d like to be,” Floris snickers. Zak doesn’t even bat an eyelash at that. Clay respects that, honestly. He can already feel the butterflies in his stomach if anyone ever said that to him about George.

“Uh...scenery is always nice,” Nick mumbles sleepily.

“But if I wanted scenery I could always take a picture!”

“That’s true,” Floris says. “What about painting a model. You could always ask Darryl to model for you again.”

“He’ll slap me across the face and probably literally roast me once we’re back inside the Metaverse.” The first one doesn’t sound like Darryl at all, but the second...

“What even *is* your theme?” Gina asks, the sounds of gunshots ringing through the background as she taps furiously on her phone.

Zak seems to think for a while, then sighs. “I dunno. It’s like I’ve been hit with what you call an art block.” He sighs again. “Why can’t I paint something like the Sylvaria?”

[The Sylvaria](#), the original which remains safely in Zak’s hands, the final keepsake he has of his late mother. It’s displayed proudly in Darryl’s room, hanging on the wall, visible behind Zak.

“I’m sure you can,” Eret says. “Your skill is impeccable.”

“No, but, like, it’s not pure,” Zak says, growing frustrated. “Is it ‘cause I’m not painting for art’s sake?”

“Painting for art’s sake?” Clay asks.

“Okay, so some context here that I forgot to tell you guys. You know how I’m participating in this competition, right? So the thing is, this competition is hosted by this Foundation and they wanna scout out budding artists.”

“And?” Gina asks, putting down her phone and leaning forward in her chair, George’s voice faint in the background.

“So I entered the competition to prove to the director guy that I can survive by painting for art, you know. Not for money,” Zak says, hurling himself onto the bed, his screen shaking. “But if I think about it, I’m trying to earn his praise, right? That makes me no different from Marion!”

“Well,” Clay says, mind searching for the right words. “I mean, that applies to everyone, right?”

“Everyone? Including you?”

“Yeah,” Clay says. He yearns for the praise of the public for the Thieves’ success, as well as the admiration of the Thieves themselves. “I’m sure the others feel the same.”

“You want someone to acknowledge your work, right?” Harvey says. “That’s some serious passion you’ve got there.”

“Really?” Zak looks hopeful.

“I daresay even the Sylvaria was painted for the sake of others,” Floris says.

“For people to look upon it and feel the same gentleness we all felt,” Clay says. “There’s absolutely nothing wrong with wanting to do stuff for others, Zak.”

Zak nearly drops his laptop as he leaps out of bed, setting it down on his desk, his euphoria seeping through the screen, his ecstasy infectious.

“Oh my God, guys! I’ve got an idea! I’m gonna paint with all I have right now and no one’s gonna stop me!”

“We’re going in the Palace tomorrow, though,” Nick says. “If you stay up all night you’re gonna crash.”

Zak ends the meeting right there and then. “*Host has ended the meeting*” flitting mockingly across Clay’s screen.

“Well then,” Nick says, flipping his laptop shut. He reaches over and places it on the desk. There is the shuffle of blankets beneath Clay. “Night.”

“Good night,” Clay says. He rises and places his laptop on the shelf and grabs his phone. He has yet to wash up for the night, so he leaves the room to do just that.

Chapter End Notes

Proficiency +5 (read book)

Devil arcana rank 5 -> 6 (AntF)

Kindness +3 (doing the request)

Councillor arcana rank 5 -> 6 (montgomery)

Star arcana rank 7 -> 8

Spaceport of Greed: Infiltration Core

Chapter Summary

the hydraulic press part

Chapter Notes

getting nearer to lee's treasure

dream smp spoilers:

I literally thought it was over when tubbo took the podium and became the president and that sinking feeling really crashed down on me when i realized that WILBUR WAS MISSING and then PHILZA JOINED THE GAME and i was like "holy shit" but damn was that explosion cool af

all in all it was a hell of a rollercoaster

9/26 – SATURDAY – DAYTIME

The corridor is clear. Dream emerges from the safe room with Fundy right beside him. There are Shadows patrolling the Export Line, which they had come from their previous time here in the Palace.

“Door to the left. It leads to the Disposal Line.”

“Disposal Line? So all those parts are getting thrown into the incinerator or something?” TapL asks, folding his arms as he watches the conveyor belt move along, the cranes still fallen in place.

Navi shrugs. “Don’t know. Let’s go and check it out.”

The Disposal Line, as Clay expected, is nothing pretty, but what they saw is disturbing on so many levels that he simply had to avert his gaze the moment he realizes what is happening.

Robots that had broken down, likely due to the overwork and stress, are being hurled straight into the incinerator, blazing fires making quick work of their bodies and melting them to ash. Employees unable to work are deemed useless and tossed into the fire, their very being used as sustenance to keep the factory going, to keep the production happening.

“No way,” TapL stumbles back, a hand pressed flat against the wall. “No way. I can’t believe...”

“This is what your dad’s really like,” Bad says.

“I knew he was...mistreating people but...I didn’t know it was *this* bad,” TapL says. Dream pointedly looks away. If this is how he views his employees in the real life as well...

“Come on. Let’s not waste time standing here,” Sapnap says. “The sooner we can change his heart, the better.”

Walking past the Disposal Line, hearing the roar of the fire, brings to mind the gruesome images of the robotic employees hurled headfirst into the incinerator, burned till there’s nothing left, all for the benefit of the man at the top. Thankfully, the next door is right ahead, which leads them straight into the Production Line.

The Production Line is bustling with activity as well. There are more robots here, hurrying to and fro, carrying weighty pieces of machine parts – similar to the ones they had seen in the Export Line – and pushing trolleys to and fro. None of them seem to have noticed their arrival. Or even if they did, they don’t care enough to tell on them.

“The Treasure’s just past that door there,” Navi says, gesturing to a door at the far end of the room. “The shortest route...” Navi stares at the map, head tilted. “The shortest route is...”

“What’s wrong?”

“There *is* no nearest route. The other side is completely blocked off from here.”

“Maybe the employees here are low-ranking, so they aren’t allowed access to the other side,” Fundy says. “Since that’s where the Treasure is, that would make sense.”

“So they’re not important enough,” Eret says.

“Then how are we going to get all the way over there?” Skeppy asks.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Dream says, stepping forward, walking past the throngs of worker robots. “We make our own path.”

“You just wanted to say something cool,” Nick mutters with a slight chuckle. “So, how are we going to do that?”

“Navi, is there anything we can manipulate around here?” Dream asks. “Like the cranes from the last room?”

“There is actually something,” Navi says. “We can control the hydraulic presses.”

Dream glances over to the large machines in question thumping away. He wouldn’t want to be under that massive piece of metal when it’s down. He doesn’t fancy getting crushed flat like a pancake.

“What if we use the presses to get over to the other side?” TapL asks. “Like, can we walk on them?”

“If we can get them to stop,” Navi says. “I can use Necronomicon to fly over to the other side, but you guys can’t, so...”

Dream’s gaze follows the sleek body of the hydraulic press, its rhythmic pounding starting to hurt his ears. He spies a platform on the other end which seems to lead them further in.

“The control panel for this press is over there,” Navi says, pushing past several robots. He leads the group over to a familiar control panel and Dream scans the Chief Director’s card. The panel blinks to life, a holographic screen and keyboard fizzling into existence.

Instead of increasing the speed of the press this time, the commands available to them are: “Break”, “Lunchtime” and “Overtime”.

“Overtime would probably keep the press going,” Eret says. “What about ‘Break’?”

Navi taps the command. The press grinds to a halt, its pressing plate raised high above its bolster. At this position, it gives them enough space to dash across it to reach the platform on the other side! If they keep this up, then-

“To all employees.” An emotionless voice speaks overhead. Dream’s heart leaps to his throat, and for a moment he was sure that they had gotten caught. “It is now time for a five-second break.”

Five seconds? There’s no way they can cross the press in that time! Before Dream can even blink, breaktime is over, and the robots and presses get back to work.

“That’s ridiculous,” Bad says, frowning. “Five seconds is too short!”

“I can’t rest in five seconds, that’s for sure,” Skeppy says. “What’s the last option?”

“‘Lunch’,” Eret reads. “It’s likely to be longer than ‘Break’.”

“But if ‘Break’ was five seconds...” Dream can’t imagine that “Lunch” would give them more time.

“We still have to try. It might work,” Navi says. He taps on the “Lunch” command. As expected, the hydraulic press once more chugs to a halt and the workers on the ground stand motionless, as if shut down.

“To all employees, it is now time for a thirty-second lunch break. Let us consume our slop and gleefully re-energize!”

“Thirty seconds!” Bad cries.

“Go, go, go!” Dream begins to sprint, Sapnap and Fundy right behind him. Thirty seconds is all they need. The Thieves leap over the fallen robots, brushing past those still upright.

“Shadows behind you!” Navi shouts.

There’s no time to worry about them now.

“Twenty seconds!”

Dream shoots a drone about to morph, the drone crashing to the ground, sparks flying everywhere. Their footsteps are as deafening as thunder. Dream rounds the corner and leaps onto the hydraulic press, a sharp spike of adrenaline pushing his legs forward.

Any moment now...

“Fifteen!”

In ten seconds, the press is going to come down again, and anything caught in its path would be crushed, with absolutely no remains. Dream reaches the other end and leaps off the press, only to

find himself face to face with the malicious eyes of another robot. He doesn't have time to shoot this one. The Shadow bursts into a pillar of black flames, a humanoid creature with a horse's face glaring down at him with pupil-less eyes.

"Ten!"

Sapnap and Fundy make it safely across, joining Dream in his fight against the Kumbhanda.

"Nine!"

Eret rolls on the ground, summoning Robin Hood and blasting Kumbhanda aside with an arrow of light.

"Eight!"

Dream is knocked to the ground by a weight from above, a cloud of red-and-black robes getting in his face as Bad pushes off of him, shooting a fireball at an incoming Lilim.

"Shit!" Dream whips his head around, only to see TapL landing harshly on his rear, a grimace of agony on his face. He rushes past TapL, catching sight of Skeppy in one of the Shadows' hold, struggling to free himself, standing right in the middle of the hydraulic press' bolster.

["Skeppy!"](#) Bad shouts.

The Girimehkala's feet are frozen but it snorts in triumph as it holds its trophy high, grip devastatingly tight. At this rate...!

"Eret! Dream! Bless, now! Any Kou skills on you!"

However, Bad is already wielding fireballs, rushing back towards the hydraulic press.

"Five seconds left! Hurry, Dream!" Sapnap yells, the screech of metal piercing Dream's ears as a Kumbhanda's claws meet his cudgel.

"Bad! No! It's strong against Agi!" Navi shouts, Necronomicon diving towards where Skeppy is trapped, having gone unconscious from the force he's being held.

"Dream!" Eret grabs Dream's shoulder, Robin Hood already summoned. Dream swaps his Persona out to Mithra.

"Four seconds!"

The arrow of light reinforced with another barrier of Bless lances through the air, headed straight for Girimehkala. Girimehkala shrieks as the arrow decimates it, dropping a limp Skeppy into Bad's hold.

"Three seconds! Bad, grab on!" Necronomicon's tentacles slither out from within its body, shooting for Bad. Several Lilim are upon them, cackling and tittering as they pile onto the press.

Two! Dream fires and takes down several Lilim with their claws already hooked onto Bad's robes.

One...!

Bad leaps off the edge of the hydraulic press, Necronomicon's tentacles curling around his middle and he tightens his grip on Skeppy.

“Break time is over,” the automated voice states. “Let us work even harder to account for the time slacking off.”

The hydraulic press begins to move again, crashing down on whatever unlucky Shadow is still stuck between the pressing plate and the bolster. A Lilim claws at Necronomicon’s tough shell. Bad summons Carmen and hurls a fireball right into its face. Lilim shrieks, bursting into a shroud of ash and the trio beat a hasty retreat.

[Bad’s](#) feet touches down on the metal floor, Skeppy still unconscious in his arms. Fundy scampers up to them, swapping with Eret, healing magic at the ready.

“Cut through the Lilim with guns! Girimehkala’s weak to Kou skills!” Navi directs the current members fighting the enemies. Sapnap drops his cudgel with a clang and reaches for his shotgun, blasting a hole in the chest of the Lilim, her claws inches from his face.

Skeppy splutters, leaping back onto his feet once Fundy’s done with him, his wounds healed up.

“I think I had three broken ribs there.” Skeppy coughs.

“There’s too many,” Dream says. “Everyone! We’re forcing our way through!”

Another hydraulic press lies ahead, its control panel right beside it. Dream slips the Chief Director’s card from his coat pocket and presses it against the card reader. The control panel opens once more to reveal the commands, and Dream taps “Lunch” once more.

The same automated voice blares throughout the room. “To all employees, it is now time for a thirty-second lunch break. Let us consume our slop and gleefully re-energize!”

The thirty-second timer starts up again, and the hydraulic press halts. Dream leaps onto the bolster and dashes across, followed by the rest of the team, this time making it across safely with fifteen seconds to spare.

They’ve already made it to the other end and Dream finds himself staring down the door Navi had pointed out when they had first entered. However, standing in front of the door, like guards, are three rows of robots resembling the worker robots Dream had seen on the other side of the Production Line.

“Praise be to Lord Lee,” one of the robots says in a monotonous voice, stepping forward. “Lord Lee can do no wrong.”

Dream narrows his eyes. Are these workers brainwashed or something?

“Lord Lee gave us a job. We could feed our families,” one of the robots says. “We are indebted to him.”

“We need to eliminate all intruders.” Another robot joins the first two. “In the name of our lord!”

[“Everyone!](#) Get ready! They’re coming!”

Dream and Skeppy slice through their ranks with Lachesis and Goemon’s ice skills. The robots, so overworked, are on the verge of breaking down, hardly able to put up a fight. Most of them go down in a single whack of Sapnap’s cudgel, or the blast of a grenade from TapL.

The fight is over in a minute, at the maximum, the Thieves leaving behind them a mass of broken robotic bodies on the ground. Wires completely snapped, parts smashed beyond recognition.

Dream shudders as he thinks back to that scene at the Disposal Line.

There is no time to mourn. The robots are merely figments of Andre Lee's cognition, anyway. They have to move on, to the next-

Skeppy nearly trips on thin air. Bad is immediately by his side, steadying him with a hand under his arm.

"You okay?" Fundy asks.

"Little woozy," Skeppy says, waving dismissively. "I'm fine."

"No you're not," Bad insists. "That Shadow crushed your ribcage. It could have easily gotten to your lungs."

"Come on, Bad, I'm fine!"

Mechanical footsteps and whirring alerts Dream to another wave of incoming drones. He shoots one, only to realize that he's run out of bullets for this round. Sapnap covers him, whacking the spherical drone away like a baseball, sending it crashing into a wall.

"There's a safe room up ahead. Let's discuss this there," Navi says. TapL grunts as he pushes the door open, revealing a long passageway and a distorted door right at the very end. Dream makes a beeline for it, his fellow Thieves in tow.

[At least](#) this safe room has couches; they're way better than those hard, cold benches from the previous rooms.

"We're definitely nearer the Treasure now," Navi says. "Just a little more to go. We're moving from the Production Line to the Transfer Line."

"You know all those parts we saw? I wonder what they're for," Fundy says.

"Any ideas?" Dream asks, turning to TapL. "He's your dad."

TapL shakes his head. "I've got no idea. Father doesn't tell me about company stuff."

"But he wants you to succeed the company one day, right?" Sapnap asks.

TapL shrugs. "With the marriage...maybe not."

Silence hangs over them for a while.

"How's everyone feeling?" Dream asks. "Skeppy?"

"I'm good."

"No you're not," Bad huffs.

"We still have a lot of time," Eret says. "We shouldn't push ourselves."

"I agree," Navi says. "Why not come back on Tuesday or Wednesday? Bad and Skeppy were almost crushed to death today."

"I'm never going near one of those things again," Skeppy says, shaking his head.

“Well, should we end the infiltration today?” Dream says, approaching a strange hatch at a corner of the room. “I think we made quite a bit of progress.”

“The Treasure’s just past the Transfer Line, so we should be able to secure an infiltration route by the next time we come in,” Navi says.

Dream unclasps the lid of the hatch and peers into its depths. It opens up to a dimly-lit corridor accessible by a ladder on the sides of the wall.

“Where does this go?” Dream asks.

Navi accesses his map. “The entrance. We can use that to come back here anytime.”

Dream hops down through the hatch, climbing down the ladder one rung at a time till he reaches the bottom. The corridor is dark – a little creepy, he’d say – but it seems to wrap around the body of the space station.

Dream strides down the corridor and begins to walk the long way back.

*

9/26 – SATURDAY – EVENING

“You’re reading a book on billiards?” Floris looks unimpressed.

“Why are you always judging me?”

“I’m not. If you feel judged, then you’re choosing to feel judged,” Floris says haughtily, settling down beside Clay on his pillow.

“I’m trying to beat Blade,” Clay says, flipping a page, which introduces a trick shot that Clay could try. It looks difficult and he’d probably need some practice to get that down...

“By reading a book on billiards instead of actually practising it.”

“Maybe tomorrow,” Clay says. He’s been itching to play some billiards and darts, if he’s being honest, but Blade seems to be ignoring his messages lately. Perhaps he’s busy, what with being a Detective Prince and all. “Oh, I know. Let’s call the gang.”

Clay reaches for his phone and begins to type.

Me: FRIENDS

Me: do you wanna play billiards and darts tmr

Me: beatty penguin sniper

Zak: ya

Zak: Darryl says ya too

Harvey: wheres that?

Harvey: like can give me an address I need to tell my chauffeur

Nick: wtf

George: CHAFFEUR

Me: rich kid

Harvey: do u guys

Harvey: not have a chauffeur

Eret: no

Zak: weird flex but ok

Me: Harvey can u pay for us

Harvey: what no

Harvey: we get a lot of money from the palace

Eret: hes right though

Eret: we are all quite rich if you think about it

Nick: harveys dad is a ceo

Me: ehhhh I'll text u the address

Me: wait a minute cant u find it on google maps

Harvey: oh

Harvey: u right

Me: so tomorrow we can go eat lunch at that restaurant right next to it, then we can go play darts and billiards

George: sure

Me: yay

Eret: :)

Clay puts down his phone and goes back to reading the book, humming a soft tune while Floris turns away and tries to get some shut-eye.

*

Replacement Best Friend

Chapter Summary

s links

Chapter Notes

omg i just realized i forgot to put that speech thing whenever someone maxes out their s link holy shit im probably gonna go back and put those all in

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

9/27 – SUNDAY – DAYTIME

“What the hell?” Zak cries. “You cheated!”

“What? How did I cheat?” Gina scowls.

“I don’t know! You must have hacked the machine or something!”

Gina gives him a deadpan look. George laughs.

“It’s just a game, Zak,” Darryl says placatingly.

“But-!”

“Alright, it’s my turn to play with George. Shoo,” Clay says, making a shooining gesture at Zak. Zak pouts, and demands to play with Gina again once they’re done.

“You can’t beat me at darts,” George says. “I’m a pro.”

“A pro? What? You come and play often?”

“No.”

Clay laughs. George grins, approaching the number pad by the dartboard. “What score are we playing? Is seven-oh-one okay for you?”

“Ooh, that’s hard,” Clay says, but he’d like to think his aim has improved ever since he’s been playing with Blade. He can probably do a seven-zero-one game.

Clay takes the first shot, pinching the dart loosely, flicking his wrist experimentally before letting the dart fly. The dart does not miss, its tip stabbing the very centre of the board. Clay racks up points easily, shaving off a hundred and fifty points from their score total.

George is not bad himself, effortlessly scoring a hundred and sixty points. He raises his hand for a high-five, which Clay returns with equal enthusiasm. They win the round, scoring exactly seven

hundred and one points.

“We make a pretty good team, huh?” George says with a chuckle.

“A pretty *great* team.”

[An eruption](#) of cheers can be heard from the billiards table, where Eret has somehow scored a massive number of points in one go. Zak and Gina have joined them, yelling and cheering.

“They’re all so noisy.” George tuts.

“They’re like kids.”

“How long do you think this will last?” George asks, turning to face Clay. “This whole Phantom Thief business?”

“As long as we want it to,” Clay answers. “I mean, we’re helping people. We’re doing good for society. I don’t think we’ll be giving it up anytime soon.”

“Well, I wish it can last forever,” George says. He glances back at the billiards table as Darryl begins shrieking at Zak, Gina and Harvey egging them on.

Clay wishes that this can last forever too.

*

[9/27 – SUNDAY – EVENING](#)

“What’s this?” Clay asks, looking down at the stack of papers that Yao Yi has laid out in front of him, depicting something like that looks vaguely like a script.

“A plan,” Yao Yi says. “About a documentary.”

“Uh...huh...” And why is she telling him this?

“Don’t worry. I won’t use your real names.”

Clay’s eyes bulge. “What do you mean? You’re making a documentary about us?”

“I was thinking I’d record and talk about your achievements, you know,” Yao Yi says. “That once the Thieves have retired, that there’d be something to show the future generations about the good you do.”

Clay looks down at the pieces of paper. Each sentence must have been painstakingly typed out, crafted to show the world the best sides of them. Yao Yi spent so much time and effort to give them this.

“As your image manager, this is the least I can do,” Yao Yi says with a nervous chuckle. “Of course, I’m still gonna be managing the Phan-Site. You can leave that to me.”

She gathers the papers back and stuffs them into a file, handing it to Clay.

“You’re giving it to me?”

“As a memento,” Yao Yi says. “And maybe a form of motivation? To keep doing what you’re doing. No matter what other people say, you’re still helping a lot of people who can’t stand up for

themselves or speak about their troubles.”

“Thank you,” Clay says, staring down at the folder. He hasn’t heard a bad word about the Phantom Thieves in ages, but it would be nice to have someone make a documentary about what they’re doing. “Really, I’m grateful.”

Yao Yi flashes him the warmest smile, the most genuine smile that Clay has ever seen.

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast turned a vow into a blood oath. Thy bond shall become the wings of rebellion and break the yoke of thy heart. Thou hast awakened to the ultimate secret of the Moon arcana, granting thee infinite power...

“Well, I’ll be rooting for you on the sidelines!” Yao Yi says. “Go get ‘em, Clay!”

*

9/28 – MONDAY – AFTERNOON

“Do you know where the word ‘robot’ came from?”

Clay jolts from his daydream. “Uh...” He remembers reading about it somewhere. “From the Czech, right?”

“That’s correct,” Miss Lee says. “The word ‘robot’ actually came from the Czech word ‘robota’ which means ‘slave labour’.”

“Slave labour, huh?” Floris mumbles. “Reminds me of the robots in Lee’s Palace...”

They were certainly treated as slaves. That would change once they steal Lee’s heart, though.

*

9/28 – MONDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“Thanks for working out with me. I appreciate it,” Darryl says, licking at his Cornetto cone. Clay bites into his Magnum popsicle, savouring the sweetness running down his throat. Technically, they shouldn’t eat *ice cream* after working out, but...

“It’s no problem.” Clay approaches a bench and sits down, licking up a stray droplet of vanilla trickling down the sides of the popsicle.

“Oh, did I tell you? I sent Adrian off a few days ago,” Darryl says.

“Yeah. Zak told us.”

“Did he?” Darryl sounds amused.

“Uh huh. When he was asking for ideas for his new artwork.”

“For that art competition?” Darryl says, taking another bite out of his cone. “He’s really excited about that, by the way.”

“I can imagine.”

Darryl’s phone buzzes. “Speak of the devil.” He unlocks his phone, opening up to a private chat with Zak.

“What’s he asking?”

Darryl frowns. “He’s asking to go to shopping...then to go to the arcade...”

“Sounds like a date.”

“It’s *not* a date,” Darryl huffs, locking his phone. “Besides, I don’t even know whether I should go.”

“What do you mean? You have something on that day?”

“No,” Darryl begins slowly, fidgeting with his phone. “It’s just...that was something I used to do with Adrian. Walk around in that underground shopping mall at Valentine’s, then we’d head on over to the arcade...”

[Clay licks](#) a steady trail up his ice cream, catching all the watery drops of delicious vanilla on his tongue. “You know, I’m not sure whether you’ve noticed this, but you’ve been comparing Zak to Adrian a lot.”

“Really?” Darryl asks. “What makes you say that?”

“Every time Zak asks to spend time with you, you always compare him to Adrian, about how you have to remain good friends with Adrian and reject most of his invitations to hang out.”

“But-“

“I’m just saying that Zak is his own person. He isn’t Adrian, and maybe you shouldn’t let your experiences with someone else prevent you from making memories with him, right?” Clay says.

Darryl seems to take this into consideration. He munches on the biscuit cone of his ice cream. “I guess... But there’s also the issue of...”

“The fact that he asked you out, right?” Clay has to admit, Zak has got guts. Admirable.

“Yeah.”

“Have you told him yet?”

“Huh?” The question seems to have caught Darryl off guard. He stares at Clay with wide eyes. “I haven’t. I’ve still been thinking about it.”

“Well, you’ve been thinking for an awfully long time already,” Clay says, finishing up his popsicle and tossing the stick into a nearby trash can. “It’s not good to keep stringing someone along like that.”

Darryl huffs. “I’m not stringing him along.”

“Then give him an answer,” Clay says as a matter-of-factly. “Give him a straight answer. Yes or no. No beating around the bush.”

With no biscuit left to bite, Darryl chews on his bottom lip. “Yes...or no...” he repeats in the softest voice imaginable.

“Yes or no,” Clay says. “Though if you ask me, I think you care for him plenty. Who the heck jumps into a hydraulic press seconds before it’d crush you to save a friend?”

"I couldn't let Zak die," Darryl says, ears turning red. "I mean..." Realization seems to dawn on his face and he attempts to hide his face in the hood of his jacket.

"There you have it," Clay says, a grin slowly spreading across his face. "It's not that hard."

"Well," Darryl says, at a loss for words. "Would you do the same for George?"

There is no hesitation, no other answer, that Clay can possibly give. "In a heartbeat."

Darryl offers a knowing smile which Clay returns. He can feel a sort of growing kinship between himself and Darryl. Darryl informs him that they would be going out on Wednesday, so the Palace run would have to be scheduled on another day. Friday, probably.

They part ways at the station. Clay gets on his train first, finding an empty seat and plopping himself down on it, bag placed on his lap. Floris pokes his head out.

"That was cheesy as fuck. 'In a heartbeat'," Floris mocks.

"Shut up." Clay scrolls through Reddit on his phone, which Floris demands to see as well.

Thank God the carriage is empty or else Clay would definitely be getting some weird stares.

*

9/28 – MONDAY – EVENING

...was caught in a car accident as the road had frozen over. The ambulance he had been on had punctured a tyre on the journey to the hospital. Due to the busy traffic, the second dispatched ambulance could not reach him in time, and he was pronounced dead by the time he could receive medical attention...

Good Lord. There's even a video to go with the tabloid article. Clay does not dare play it. However, in its thumbnail, he does notice a familiar patch of beige fur and a grey button nose. Ant had been in the ambulance?

Ant purrs contentedly on Clay's lap, fast asleep. And it's a good thing too. Clay doesn't need Ant to watch him search for the details of his previous owner's death.

It's only when Clay is moving on to the next article that he notices Ant's head raised, large eyes peering at the screen. Ant may be just a cat, but Clay would like to think that it has the intelligence of a human. Ant digs its nose into Clay's stomach, hiding its face from the picture of Velvet that had appeared on the screen.

"I'm sorry," Clay says, deleting the tab, a hand on Ant's head. "It's not your fault, Ant."

Ant purrs quietly.

"I'll finish what Velvet started," Clay says. "I promise."

Ant snuggles even closer, if that's possible.

Clay switches his laptop off as soon as Nick returns from the bathroom.

"Get off my desk."

"I'm moving, I'm moving," Clay mutters, tucking his laptop under his arm and carrying Ant in the

other.

“When are we gonna go into the Palace next?” Nick asks, settling down in the cushy rolling chair and booting up the computer.

“Probably Friday,” Clay says. “Darryl and Zak have a date on Wednesday and I have club on Thursday.”

“They have a date?” Nick looks impressed.

“Pseudo-date. Although, it could be a date, depending on what Darryl says,” Clay says, shrugging.

Nick clicks on the icon of his shooting game and the loading screen pops up. “Have you seen the Phan-Site recently?”

“The Phan-Site? What about it?” Floris asks from Clay’s bed.

“People are egging us on,” Nick says. “They want to see Lee’s heart changed.”

“Our class is talking about that too.”

“They’re getting impatient.”

“But it’s not that easy,” Clay says, sighing.

“We can’t expect the public to know how we go about doing it,” Floris says. “All they’re seeing is the results of the heists. Of course they’d demand a lot from us.”

“Then we’re just going to have to give them what they want,” Nick says with a grin. “Think about the recognition we’d get. We’d become even more famous.”

“Harvey’s safety is the utmost priority,” Clay says firmly.

“Yeah, yeah,” Nick mumbles, but Clay can already see him living his fantasy. Of being a famous, unknown thief. Well, at least part of their charm comes from their mysterious identities. Everyone is dying to know who the great Phantom Thieves are who’d just taken the city of Fariold by storm.

Clay gently sets Ant down in his tiny bed, the cat curling up and falling asleep once again. Clay climbs back up onto his bed and decides to read some before turning in for the night.

*

9/29 – TUESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“Thanks for coming out here today.”

“Yeah, why’d you drag me out here?” Clay jokes, and George shoots him a look. They’re jostling past throngs of people in the busy streets of Chinatown, the smell of incense and herbs mixed with the aroma of Chinese sweets and delicacies. The temple he visited with Zak last time stands at the top of that mountain, a stream of tourists looking like multicoloured ants heading up or down, Clay doesn’t know.

“I need a second opinion on Gina’s present.”

“Her present?”

“Her birthday’s coming up soon,” George says.

“And why are we not at Elytra?”

“Because I’ve just been getting her games and tech stuff. This year, I want to give her something different,” George says.

“Really now?”

“Yeah,” George says as they enter a shop selling cookies. “Let’s try these.”

They spend the entire afternoon scouring for sweets that Gina would probably like, trying different foods that Clay had never even bothered to try before, or even had the chance to, for that matter.

The walk wasn’t rushed – the two of them spending as much time as they wanted patronizing the stores, buying loads of goodies with the money they earned from the Metaverse. Nick would appreciate some of these, Clay thinks, arm laden with paper and plastic bags alike.

Ultimately, they go from trying sweets to trying Chinese food in general, ending their day with a pork bun each wrapped in tiny paper bags. The sun is already beginning to set. Their energy spent, the duo finds a quiet bench beneath a large oak tree, enjoying the taste of their pork bun...albeit a little salty for Clay’s tongue.

[“Well,](#) now the real issue is hiding these from Gina before her birthday,” George says, gesturing to the bags placed beside them, plastic crinkling in the wind.

“Yeah, about that,” Clay says, munching on his bun. “When’s that? Her birthday? And you didn’t bother telling us?”

“Kind of slipped my mind,” George says, scratching his head. “Gina and I...well, it’s more like *I* don’t celebrate my birthday, so I hadn’t thought...”

“We’ll throw a surprise party for her,” Clay says, voice coming out more excited than he wanted it to. “We can get the whole gang. Come on, spill!”

“It’s...well...it’s the twelfth of October,” George says. “I didn’t want it to get in the way of the Palace infiltration too-“

“Our deadline’s on the twentieth. It can be a celebration for our success as well,” Clay says, enthusiasm apparent in his tone.

“And how do we know that we’ll be successful?”

“We’ve done it four times already,” Clay says. “We’re not going to fail this time.”

That elicits a small smile from George. He continues to chew on his bun. Clay turns back to the setting sun as well, the giant orb of fire sinking beneath the mountains, its rays bathing Chinatown in an exquisite glow.

*

[9/29 – TUESDAY – EVENING](#)

“This is a nice spot.” Tubbo leans against the fence overlooking the lake. The canopies rustle in the slight autumn breeze. Clay’s feet crunch the carpet of dead leaves as he walks over to where Tubbo is standing.

“So, what did you want to talk about?” Clay asks, joining Tubbo in watching the boats sail by.

“Oh, no. I just wanted to soak in the atmosphere, you know,” Tubbo says. “It’s really peaceful at this time of the day, isn’t it?”

There are light ripples across the water. Ducks are gathered on the lake, paddling to and fro with their little webbed feet. Swans glide gracefully across the water. The only light comes from that of streetlamps, the pools of light illuminating the gravel road every few meters. There are still a few people around, most of them jogging or brisk walking.

“Are you stressed?” Clay asks.

“Yeah, you could say that,” Tubbo says. “The competition...I don’t have high hopes for it, to be honest.”

“Why’s that?”

“I don’t know,” Tubbo says, sounding dejected. “It’s like I’ve hit some kind of block. Like an art block. Except it’s not for art. The code’s not flying, Clay. It’s just not flying.”

“You mean you’re feeling like you’re not up to standards?” Clay asks, a hand on his chin. He watches as a duck waddles on land towards a flock of its kind, leading a couple of chicks behind it.

“Something like that.”

“Maybe you need to take a break,” Clay says. “Come out here, take a little walk...you’ll be feeling better in no time. I promise. Maybe you need a few days to recover, though. You could be suffering from burnout.”

“What does ‘burnout’ mean?”

“Basically, you’re working too hard and now you’ve used up all your energy and you’re lethargic.”

“Oh. I didn’t know there was such a thing.” An owl’s hoot above them is accompanied by the flapping of wings. Clay glances up to find said owl having landed on the branch above them, head cocked ever so slightly.

“I think you should give yourself some time to rest and to find your motivation again,” Clay says.

“When’s the competition?”

“The fifth of October,” Tubbo says. That’s only a few days away – next Monday, to be exact. “I’m really kinda stressed, I’ll be honest.”

“If you ever need to talk, I can lend a listening ear,” Clay says. Tubbo shoots him a grateful smile.

“I’d probably need you to help me test something before the competition, though,” Tubbo says.

“I’ll let you know when the date’s getting nearer.”

Clay agrees, and they head back to the station. Tubbo’s an honour student who managed to get in to Enderlands because of his programming skills. If he is unable to deliver the results, Clay wouldn’t know what the school would do.

Clay wishes, as he listens to the droning of the train on the tracks, that Tubbo would do alright in the days to come...

Chapter End Notes

moon arcana rank 9 -> 10 MAX (yao yi)

lovers arcana rank 7 -> 8 (bbh)

devil arcana rank 6 -> 7 (Ant)

magician arcana rank 6 -> 7 (george)

faith arcana rank 3 -> 4 (tubbo)

Leaving It Behind

Chapter Summary

S links before the next infiltration

Chapter Notes

pretty short chap since i only need to write like 3 scenes :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

9/30 – WEDNESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“I was thinking hard about what Karl said. About the whole...the whole not-caring-for-the-students idea,” Eret says. For once, he’s not working on some kind of proposal or document, laptop put away, tabletop empty. His fingers clasped together, elbows propped up on the table, the most serious look on his face.

“Give me an honest answer, Clay,” Eret says. “Do you think that I have done enough for the students?”

Clay bites his lip. “I think you’ve done a lot on the admin side, to make sure the school runs smoothly, but, well...on the side of maybe their health and stuff...”

“I was afraid you’d say that,” Eret says, gaze dropping to the tabletop. “The thing is, I’m not sure what I can do to address this.”

“Maybe you should interact with the other students more,” Clay says. “Figure out what they need from you.”

“Even if I ask, I doubt the others would agree to this,” Eret says with a sigh. “After all, I’m the ‘feared’ Student Council president.”

“I can introduce you to some people,” Clay says, clearing his throat. “Not the Thieves, but some other people.”

“Really?” Eret’s expression lights up in surprise. “I would really appreciate it if you would. And...” He glances away, a hand on his nape. “If you wouldn’t mind, could you, maybe...sit in?”

“You mean while you talk to them?”

“Yes.”

Clay nods. “Sure, why not?”

Eret’s shoulders sag with relief, a smile gracing his lips. “Thank you, Clay.”

Eret has a consultation with a teacher after their meeting, so Clay leaves him to it and decides to head straight home.

*

9/30 – WEDNESDAY – EVENING

“What are you doing?” Floris asks. “Aren’t you supposed to be studying?”

“Cut me some slack,” Clay mutters, leaning back against the chair and kicking his legs up on Nick’s table. “Chemistry is hard.”

“Gina’s birthday party,” Floris reads from Clay’s screen. “You started a new chatgroup?”

“Yeah, ‘cause Gina’s in the other one,” Clay says.

Me: guys

Me: birthday party ideas pls

Darryl: oooh when is this??

Me: October 12

Zak: wait what

Nick: gina has a birthday?

Nick: wait im dumb ignore me

Darryl: everyone has a birthday you muffinhead

Me: nick aren’t you in the shower right now

Nick: im taking a nice dump

Harvey: I did NOT need to know that

Harvey: also im not sure whether I’ll be free on the twenty-second

Harvey: we have a company party at destinyland

George: a company party at destinyland?

Zak: what the heck what kind of company party is that

Me: wouldn’t it be really crowded?

Harvey: we rented out the whole place so

Darryl: ...

Nick: ...

Zak: ...

George: ...

Me: ...

Harvey: what

George: it's nothing

Me: it's not every day you're friends with someone who can rent out an entire theme park

Harvey: oh

Me: anyway friends whats the plan for gina's b'day

Harvey: would she enjoy at trip to destinyland

George: im not sure

George: but I think it would be awkward if we peasants just joined your rich people party

Harvey: I think we can extend the rent by another day if we need to

Harvey: then we'll have the entire park to ourselves

Me: EXTEND THE RENT

Nick: omg

Darryl: I think we should ask gina first

Zak: but then it wouldn't be a surprise anymore!

Darryl: maybe George can just discreetly ask

George: I'll try

Me: great

Harvey: let me know ASAP so I can check whether I can extend the rent

George: ok

Well, the party planning is going nowhere till they get Gina's answer. The door swings open and quick as a flash, Clay swings his legs off the table only to find Nick glaring at him.

"Did you kick my com?"

"No."

"If I find that my monitor has been moved in any way..."

"Oh you won't because I didn't kick anything," Clay says, yawning nonchalantly and packing up his unfinished Chemistry homework. Floris leaps off his shoulder onto the floor. "Nights."

Nick settles down at his desk to study as Clay shoves his textbook and worksheets into his bag. He heads up to his bed, Floris by his side. He blinks at the sudden buzzing of his phone.

Guess he's got an appointment tomorrow. After he's done with his club activities, that is.

10/1 – THURSDAY – EVENING

“So, what did you want to talk about?”

“I want to give you something,” Tommy says, drawing open the zipper of his bag and reaching into it, grabbing what appears to be a toy gun. A nerf gun. Nothing realistic like what Phil sells.

“What’s this? Are you unloading your junk onto me?”

“Watch what you say, Dre,” Tommy huffs, aiming the nerf gun at him for just a second, before shoving it at Clay. “Phil gave me this right after I left the Family.”

Clay holds it in his hands. It’s light, the orange a powerful contrast against its grey body.

“This is my last memento of the Family,” Tommy says, “and if I’m gonna leave it all behind, I’m gonna have to give this away too. I thought I should give it to you, since you helped me a lot and all.”

“Helped you? Actually, you helped me. With the game,” Clay says.

“Really, Mr Phantom Thief?” Tommy says with a grin. “How’s playing arcade games gonna help you?”

“What?” Clay looks up from where he’s stuffing the nerf gun into his bag. “What did you just call me?”

“Look, I’m not stupid,” Tommy says. “You know that whole thing with Punz? I thought it was kinda weird that you asked for Punz’s name. Then the change of heart happened and I went, ‘Oh’.”

Well then. Clay bites his lip.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost, big man.”

“No, no, I haven’t,” Clay says. “Whatever makes you think that?”

“You think I’m going to spill to the police, aren’t you?” Tommy says, shaking his head and laughing. “The thing is, Dre, did you know that people at my school call me Tommy Trusty?”

Clay snorts.

“You can count on me, big man,” Tommy says, thumping a fist against his chest. “I’ll keep your secret safe.”

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast turned a vow into a blood oath. It shall become the wings of rebellion and break the yoke of thy heart. Thou hast awakened to the ultimate secret of Death, granting thee infinite power...

“Thanks, Tommy,” Clay says, slinging his bag over his shoulder.

“You have to treat me to ice cream, though, in exchange.”

Clay lets out a breathless chuckle. Typical Tommy. The duo make their way to the nearest ice cream stand, elbowing past the growing crowd of Valentine’s on this breezy evening.

Chapter End Notes

emperor arcana rank 5 -> 6 (eret)

knowledge +3 (studying)

kindness +3 (gardening)

death arcana rank 9 -> 10 MAX (tommy)

Spaceport of Greed: Infiltration Finale

Chapter Summary

airlocks galore

Chapter Notes

OMG 100+ BOOKMARKS WOOOO u guys are amazing :)))

well i cant say that this was my favourite puzzle

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

10/2 – FRIDAY – MORNING

Clay wakes up to a private message from a familiar number.

Gina: Yo

Me: what is it

Gina: I think destinyland sounds nice

Me: George asked you already?

Gina: no

Gina: idk why

Gina: I was waiting

Gina: but he never did

Me: that's weird

Me: wait a minute

Me: then how do you know about this

Gina: I have my ways :)

Me: scary

Gina: oh and I know you got me sweets

Gina: thanks I like sweets

Me: wtf

Me: how are u knowing all this

Gina: don't forget who you're talking to

That ended on an ominous note. Oh well. He hears Mr Armstrong call from the dining room and heads down to grab some breakfast, where Nick is already slurping down a bowl of cereal.

Even as he shovels cornflakes into his mouth, as Mr Armstrong mumbles something about the upcoming presidential election, he can't stop thinking about what Gina had said. Or rather, its implications.

How had she known?

*

10/2 – FRIDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“Wait, what?”

Navi inspects the airlock, peering at the green ring around it, the symbol of alpha inscribed on the glass. Beyond that block of glass, Dream realizes, is an endless expanse of space. Twinkling clusters of stars, belts of asteroids and distant planets sitting against a background of black.

“We get to fly through space?” There is no hiding the excitement in Sapnap’s voice.

“I think it’s our only way forward,” Eret says, arms folded.

“Navi?” Fundy asks.

“There’s a similar airlock in another chamber on the other end,” Navi says, drawing up his map and showing the team. “I think we’re going to have to fly our way there.”

TapL lets out a small noise of surprise. “Oh my God...we actually *do* get to fly through space.”

“So, how does this work?” Dream shoves his hands into his pockets. Beside the airlock is a giant button, which he’s certain would open the glass pane. Would they have to swim their way to the other side? Without getting lost in space? Suddenly, a thought pops into his head that has his heart leaping wildly. More importantly, would there be air?

“So apparently this airlock doesn’t work like any other airlock,” Navi says. “When you push that button, you’ll fly in one direction till you reach the other side. Basically, it’s used as transportation for machine parts.”

“Then I suppose we’ll see Shadows on the other end,” Eret says.

“On that note, everyone get ready for battle,” Fundy says. “We could get swarmed by Shadows as soon as we get to the other side.”

“Can we breathe, though?” Bad asks, sounding worried.

“I was wondering that too,” Eret says.

“It shouldn’t take more than a few seconds to fly through from one airlock to the next,” Navi says. “We just have to hold our breaths for a couple of seconds.”

Dream hopes that they won’t instantly freeze the moment they’re past the glass. He takes a deep

breath and squares his shoulders, finger hovering over the button. There's no time to hesitate. If they don't get past this, they're never going to reach the Treasure, and what would become of the Thieves then?

Dream slams his fist against the button and the airlock opens. The rush of cold air slaps him in the face as he gets sucked out to space, body hurtling through the chill of cognitive space.

Dream yelps as he crashes into a solid wall. Behind him, the other Thieves follow, TapL and Fundy smashing straight into him. God, Dream thinks he probably cracked a rib or something. Eret and Navi land gracefully, while Sapnap, Bad and Skeppy end up in a heap of limbs on the ground.

"Get off me!" Sapnap yells, the glass pane of the airlock closing behind him.

Dream rubs at his temples as Fundy and TapL give him some breathing room. Where are they? There are no Shadows in sight, though the faint whirring in the distance says otherwise.

"What's that?" TapL asks, skipping over to what appears to be another control panel, except that instead of a keyboard, this one controls...whatever it controls with levers. There is a sign above each lever: with the symbol for alpha inscribed above one, while the symbol for omega is inscribed above the other.

"I think it has something to do with the airlocks," Bad says. "Remember how the glass had an alpha on it?"

But what does that mean, exactly? What does flipping these levers have to do with the airlocks?

"Hey guys, this one looks kinda different."

Dream glances towards where Sapnap is standing beside another airlock. Instead of a ring of green, the airlock is colourless, the symbol of omega etched into the glass.

"Could it be that flipping these levers will activate and deactivate the airlocks with the respective symbols?" Eret suggests.

It's worth a shot. Currently, only the lever below the symbol alpha is lit up, which most likely means that the airlocks with the same symbol are active. Well, might as well activate everything.

However, when Dream pulls the omega lever up, the alpha lever moves down simultaneously. Try as he might, there is no way he can get both levers to be up or down at the same time.

"Dude, what the heck?" Skeppy mutters. "This thing's broken!"

"I think it was designed this way," Fundy says. "This sucks."

"So while the alpha airlocks are active, the omega airlocks are shut down," Dream mumbles. "And we don't know how many more of these chambers there are, or where the airlocks lead us."

"I can't help with the airlocks, but according to the map, we have quite a long road ahead of us," Navi says. Dream leans over his shoulder to get a good view of the map. There's one set of airlocks that has already automatically made a connection on the map, and it is the airlock that they had just come through.

That means that if they continue to pass through more airlocks, the map would fill up with the pathways that each set of airlocks open up, so they'd be able to find the best route to the deepest part off the space station.

“Right guys,” Dream says, pulling at the hem of his gloves. “Let’s get moving.”

*

“I think I’m getting vertigo,” TapL mutters, holding his head as they enter what must have been their tenth airlock that day. Dream is feeling a little dizzy himself, what with the need to hold their breath and the sheer ice of space and the spinning about in space...

“We’re almost there guys. Don’t give up,” Navi says, passing through the airlock, hiding ever so safely in Necronomicon. Dream’s glad that Navi doesn’t have to go through...whatever they’re going through. This abomination of an experience. The ground’s already swaying beneath his feet.

“Easy for you to say!” Sapnap cries, leaning against the wall.

Skeppy groans. “I’m gonna puke.”

“Do you hear that?” Eret says, holding up a hand.

“Shadows.” Navi lands on his feet, pulling up his map, blinking red dots approaching their location.

“Shadows? Now? When I felt like I just went on a rollercoaster?” Bad summons Carmen, fireballs dancing on the tips of her fingers. Dream calls upon Atropos just as the wave of drones appear round the corner.

The first few fall victim to Bad and Skeppy’s combined attack, the slew of fireballs wrapped in ice, streaking like comets down the chamber. Sapnap and TapL pick off those that bypassed the barrage, only to see another wave of robots emerging from behind them.

Eret fires a rain of arrows accompanied by Fundy’s whirling blades of wind, striking down the rest of the enemies, mechanical parts clanking to the ground, dissolving into ash. Dream sends the rest packing with a raging cloud of lightning.

When the wave clears, they dismiss their Personas. The wooziness is gone, as if by magic. Dream heads down the corridor where the Shadows came from, managing to find a control panel at the end. He pulls the omega lever up, the airlock beside him blinking to life and whirring.

“We’re very close to the Treasure now,” Navi says. “I think this is the final airlock.”

“Let’s go then,” Fundy says, stepping towards the airlock. The rest of the Thieves gather around it, and Dream presses the button.

Once again, they are engulfed by the rush, the speed, as they dart past constellations, past a meteorite shooting past them. They make it to the other side safely, and Dream takes in a large gulp of air.

Dream looks up and comes face to face with a Shadow that towers over him, taking on the form of a mechanical angel, a bronze faceless golem.

“The Treasure’s right behind that door,” Navi says lowly. “We’re going to have to beat it.”

“Beat me?” the Shadow, Melchizedek, chortles. “You dare challenge an angel and Lord Lee’s elite guard?”

Dream summons Atropos. “Damn right you are.”

[Melchizedek](#) cackles. With only about a second's worth of warning from Navi, Dream does a somersault back down the narrow corridor. Already, lesser Shadows are beginning to gather around them, emerging from the walls, dripping from the ceiling.

"Navi, what are its weaknesses?" Dream shouts, ducking to avoid a giant golden fist launched at him like a rocket.

"Uh...um..." Navi sounds panicked. Necronomicon can hardly be summoned in such a small area. "Weak to Garu! Don't use Psi, uh...Kou, Hama, Ei or-!" Navi slams his back against the wall, eyes wide as he watches a golden fist sail by right where his head was.

"Or Mudo!" Eret shouts.

"Eret, Fundy, Skeppy, you're with me," Dream says, hacking away at a Shadow that has bled through the ground, latching onto his feet. "Everyone else, deal with the Shadows! Navi, help *them*!"

There is a collective sound of agreement as the Thieves split ways, utterly in sync with each other. Dream fires a round of bullets at the angel's fist, barely stopping it in its tracks as the fist crashes to the floor with a resounding thud.

"Look out!" Eret leaps at Dream, knocking him aside before the Hamaon hits, a pillar of light that would have sent him straight to heaven.

"You alright?" Fundy asks, and Eret helps him up. Skeppy has constructed a barrier of ice but it doesn't last long, shattered by the next God's Hand, shards of ice raining down on them.

"Fundy, on the count of three," Dream says, leaping to the side to dodge another column of light. Fundy summons Zorro.

Eret and Skeppy summon a forcefield of light reinforced with Skeppy's ice dome, protecting them from yet another one of Melchizedek's attacks.

"Three, two..." The forcefield breaks once more under the pressure of the literal flying fists, and Dream summons Arahbaki, its body flashing a blinding white.

"What the-!" Melchizedek throws up both arms in attempt to shield itself from the light, only to be met with an onslaught of wind sickles, nicking at its bronze torso and limbs, slicing its wings clean off.

Melchizedek lands unceremoniously on the ground. A stomp of its foot throws up a veil of light, rendering itself immune to all attacks. Bullets ricochet off the surface, piercing holes into unlucky Shadows behind them. Even Fundy's wind blades are unable to penetrate the curtain of light.

"Try hitting me now, you bastards!" Melchizedek cackles from behind the veil.

"Skeppy!"

Skeppy plunges his katana into the ground and the cracking of ice stabs at Dream's ears. Melchizedek doesn't even see it coming. A giant spear of ice arrows up from beneath it, skewering it like meat on a stick. Melchizedek gurgles, black blood trickling from the corner of its mouth before it dissolves into a cloud of powdery ash.

The veil of light dissipates and the door is now open to them. The final door where the Treasure lies behind.

Bad sets the final Shadow aflame, its unholy chittering grating on Dream's ears as it bursts into ash.

["Shall](#) we get going?" Navi says, wiping a smear of black blood off his cheek. How? Dream asks himself. How does one look so charming covered in Shadow blood, mask aglow?

A simple "Yeah" is all he can manage.

Dream taps the button on its side, bracing for that potential feeling of getting sucked into a void. He lets out an audible sigh of relief when the door merely slides into the wall, revealing a flight of stairs.

Dream leads his team up the flight of stairs, taking them two at a time. When he gets to the top, he catches sight of the familiar disembodied sphere floating in the middle of the chamber. That must be the Treasure.

["What's](#) this?" TapL asks, reaching out to touch it, only for his hand to pass through the wavering shroud.

"The Treasure," Fundy explains. "It's the root of the Palace owner's desires."

"But I don't see anything," TapL says, folding his arms and inspecting it from different angles.

"That's because we need it to materialize," Bad says, "and that's where the calling card comes in."

"So the calling cards weren't just for show?" TapL's eyes light up.

"Nope," Dream says. "Basically we're going to tell the Palace rulers in real life that their desires are going to get stolen."

"Because this world is based off the Palace ruler's cognitions, making them think that their desires are something tangible that can be stolen will make the Treasure appear," Eret says.

"Okay, I don't think I got that, but we just need to send the calling card then the Treasure will take shape, right?"

"Something like that," Sapnap says.

"The calling card's effect only lasts a day, though," Fundy says. "Means that on the day we send the calling card, we're going to have to go into the Palace to steal the Treasure."

"And it's usually Dream who tells us when to send it," Navi says.

"Speaking of which, let's do it next Wednesday," Dream says. "Everyone's free then, right?"

"I'm free," Bad says.

"Same," Eret says, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. There is unanimous agreement between the Thieves.

"That means we need to get it done by Tuesday," Dream says. "Skeppy, is that fine with you?"

"Yeah, sure," Skeppy says, nodding.

"Who's going to deliver the calling card?" Navi asks.

“Who else?” Dream turns his gaze to TapL.

TapL jabs a finger at himself. “Me?”

“Well, he’s your dad. You’d be in the prime position to give it to him,” Sapnap says.

“Just say you found it in your mailbox or something,” Fundy says. “It’s gonna work. Trust me.”

TapL looks apprehensive, glancing around at the faces of the other Thieves. He sighs. “Yeah, I guess I can do it.”

“Make sure not to get caught,” Dream says with a grin. “Alright then, if that’s settled, I think it’s time for us to leave.”

[“Wait](#), before we go, Bad and I have an announcement to make,” Skeppy says, grabbing hold of Bad’s hand.

Bad looks almost embarrassed, cheeks turning a bright red. “Now?”

Skeppy ignores him and twines their fingers together, raising their joined hands up high. “We’re dating.”

There is a mixture of “Congratulations!” and “You couldn’t have waited till we got out of this Shadow-infested area?” from the Thieves, Dream being in the former camp, of course, elated that after months of pining (on Skeppy’s side, at the very least), they have taken action, answered the call of their hearts.

[“I hate](#) to break up this happy, uh, announcement,” Navi says, “but there are Shadows coming.”

“Okay, we can discuss this more once we get outta here,” Dream says. “Navi, where’s the nearest safe room?”

“Down the hallway. Follow me!” Navi begins to sprint, the Thieves following him as Shadows begin to emerge from the floors and the walls, their disturbing masked faces glaring at them as they make a break for it.

Navi slams his shoulder against the door of the safe room, barging in. TapL kicks the door shut in the face of a Shadow, the Shadow’s furious screeching audible from within this...this room, which must be some kind of executive lounge, judging from the expensive-looking furniture and the extravagant walls lined with fancy baubles.

[“We...we](#) made it,” Dream breathes.

“Yeah,” Bad says, hand still in Skeppy’s as he leans back against the couch, head angled at the ceiling, hood of his robe pooling around his nape.

“Wait, so you guys are dating? Since when? How come you didn’t tell us?” Sapnap and Fundy slink over to where the duo is sitting.

“Since...Wednesday, I think,” Bad says, scratching his head, a bashful expression on his face.

“Yeah, Bad took forever to give me an answer,” Skeppy says, eliciting a yelp from Bad and a slap on his shoulder. “Ow, what was that for?”

“Not gonna lie, I thought Bad would be the first one to ask,” TapL says, fingers clasped behind his head.

Well, the question-and-answer session isn't going to stop itself. Dream claps his hands loud enough to grab everyone's attention. "Okay guys, you can ask Bad and Skeppy all you want after we get out of here, okay? Four people here have a strict curfew."

"I *told* you, I don't have a curfew!" Fundy cries.

Following Navi's direction, they take a shortcut through a convenient passageway to an airlock that would catapult them all the way back to the entrance. After activating it from this side, the airlock would remain open, so they can come back to this safe room immediately on the day of the heist.

They shoot through space like cannonballs, though the landing is less graceful than Dream would have liked. His cheek kisses the floor, and someone's foot crashes into his back. Oh God, his *spine*!

Just as Navi said, they have arrived back at the main entrance. Dream picks himself up, a hand pressed flat against his back where someone had just stepped on him, the other reaching for his phone and activating the Meta-Nav.

"Returning to the real world. Thank you for your hard work."

*

[10/2 – FRIDAY – EVENING](#)

"Die you asshole!" Nick screeches.

"Take that, bitch!" Clay yells, slamming the Joy-Con on the ground and leaping into the air when he successfully hurls Nick's Mario off the platform, his Kirby standing proudly on the platform. Nick lets out an otherworldly noise as he stuffs his face against the pillow, body slumped in defeat.

"I think," an amused voice says, "that you boys should stop playing for tonight if that's the kind of language you're going to be using."

Clay shudders and turns around, meeting eyes with a smiling Mr Armstrong, who has just come down from the second floor. He settles with a sigh into the armchair by the television, picking up the newspaper on the coffee table.

"Sorry," Clay and Nick mumble in unison.

"In any case, it's getting late," Mr Armstrong says. "I've just managed to convince your mother to head to bed."

"This is the first time she's home in, what, weeks?" Nick pouts, looking a little worried.

"Yes, she says she's quite close to catching the Phantom Thieves now," Mr Armstrong says.

"Though I wished she'd take better care of herself. It looks like her reputation is riding on this one."

Nick frowns. Clay can almost read his mind. It's hard to admit it, but it's because of them that Mrs Armstrong is feeling the pressure, the pressure to perform and catch the elusive Thieves. He's stuck between a rock and a hard place. On one hand, he cannot continue to let Mrs Armstrong suffer like this. She took him in despite his circumstances and eventually came to trust him. Yet, he cannot bear to let his Thieves take the fall. Not when they've just gotten started on their career, their double life.

Nick heads up to bed first, while Clay goes into the kitchen to make himself a cup of tea.

He is extra quiet when making his way past the master bedroom. It's the least he can do for now...

*

Chapter End Notes

Dream's Personas (9/10):

- Kaiwan
- Atropos
- Legion
- White Rider
- Arahbaki
- Hell Biker
- Mitra
- Daisoujou
- Unicorn

A Brother's Lament

Chapter Summary

something unexpected has occurred...

tubbo-centric chap for friends who have been waiting for more of tubbo screentime

Chapter Notes

hey guess what forgetful author back with a terrible terrible realization - gina's birthday is actually on the 12 of october not 22 i got my dates mixed up. i've gone back to previous chapters and changed it BUT just to remind everyone that the heist deadline is actually the 10th which i had completely forgotten i thought it was the 20th

also u can probably tell but i was writing this half-asleep

i just watched tubbo's pov of schlatt's funeral (oh god i have 1000 streams i need to watch and yet exams are being a bitch) and i literally laughed like hell in the living room everyone was just staring at me funny

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

10/3 – SATURDAY – DAYTIME

“Please come in,” Tubbo says, toeing his shoes off at the door and stepping into his slippers.

“Do I need to take off my shoes?”

“Uh...” Tubbo tilts his head in question. “We don’t really care, to be honest. You can just wear them in.”

“Are your parents home?” Clay asks, following Tubbo up the stairs, an alien feeling creeping up his spine.

“No, they’re out,” Tubbo says. He leads Clay up another flight of stairs that reaches the attic. With how cramped it is, it reminds Clay somewhat of George’s house. “My dad’s working and my mom’s volunteering.”

“Volunteering?”

“Yeah. An animal shelter.” Tubbo settles down at his desk where three monitors sit, hooked up to two CPUs. With Tubbo’s permission, Clay takes a seat on his bed, peering over Tubbo’s shoulder to look at the monitor. A window is open, Tubbo’s fingers flying over the keyboard and typing code rapidly into the program. Clay can hardly make heads or tails of it, the string of numbers, letters and punctuation marks that fill the black space.

“Okay, here,” Tubbo says, holding up the VR headset. The device had blended in so well with the

dark surface of his table that Clay hadn't even noticed that it was there.

He puts it on, and is immediately sucked into the world of Mimecraft. He didn't even know that Tubbo knew this game. The blocky world is just like how he remembers it, even though he hasn't logged on in forever. A pair of headphones and two controllers are slid into his ears and hands, the familiar calming tune of the Mimecraft soundtrack allowing him to move about and interact with objects in the game.

"Can you hear me?" Tubbo asks. His voice is a little staticky, booming through the headphones.

"Yeah, I can hear you. A little too loud, though." Tubbo's headphones must be the epitome of 'noise-cancelling'. He can barely hear himself.

"Okay, give me a second," Tubbo says. The next time he speaks, the volume is considerably lower. "Better?"

"Much better."

"Okay, okay, so you know how to play this game, right?"

"Yeah."

"Awesome," Tubbo says. "Now, here's what I'd like you to do."

Clay follows his commands to an absolute T, doing exactly what Tubbo asks him to. Time flies by without him even realizing it. It is only when Tubbo helps him remove the headphones and the headset that Clay realizes that it is way past noon. Or not. He blinks, eyes adjusting to the brightness of the sunlight.

"That was great," Tubbo says. "I think I'm gonna do well tomorrow."

"That's good to hear." Clay smooths down his tousled hair. "I'm sure your brother would be proud of you."

[Tubbo](#) brightens up. Clay follows his gaze, at a framed photograph standing on Tubbo's bedside table. It clearly depicts two smiling boys who look almost identical. It must have been taken some time ago from how young they look, rosy cheeks and eyes squinted against the sun.

"I'll give it all I've got tomorrow," Tubbo says, "and I have to thank you, Clay, for helping me through these trying times."

"It's no problem," Clay says, nodding. "I'll look forward to seeing the results of your hard labour."

Tubbo flashes him a grateful smile.

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast birthed a bond clad in the heart's strength. This union, born and embraced by will unyielding, shall become the balefire that lights thy path. Thou has gained a glimpse of the Faith's truth, granting thee further power to tread the abyss...

"Well then, I guess I'll see you in school soon," Tubbo says. He sees Clay to the train station and thanks him once more for helping him throughout the competition.

"He's a good kid," Floris says on the way back, voice muffled over the rattling of the train carriages.

"He is," Clay agrees. For Tubbo's sake, for his brother's sake, Tubbo has to win.

*

10/3 – SATURDAY – EVENING

Blade has responded to his messages, saying he's way too busy now to hang out, what with school and detective work and all. He'd let Clay know again once he's got some free time. Clay hums as he continues to sweep the floor, gathering up all those little dust particles into the dustpan.

"I would appreciate it if you could, you know," Clay sighs, "help, maybe?"

Nick looks up from his crossword puzzle. "There's this jacket I really, really want to win, Clay. If you could help *me*, then I can help *you*."

It's probably just faster to do it himself.

Lord is sweeping and mopping the floor backbreaking work. And that's saying something when they've been running around in the Metaverse a lot recently. Once he's done with the kitchen, the final room of the day, he settles with his back to the counter, a cup of warm water in hand.

"Hey, there's a message from the PT," Nick says, walking into the kitchen, leaving his phone in Clay's hand and walking over to the refrigerator.

George: gina's fine with destinyland

Harvey: great

Harvey: now lets see whether I can extend the rent

Harvey: although I have to say

Harvey: please don't have high hopes

Nick: or we could just go the next day

Nick: the park would be open right

Nick: it'll just be a little bit more uncomfortable

Darryl: I don't mind

Nick returns to Clay's side with a Monster in hand. "So, Destinyland?"

"Seems like it, with or without the park to ourselves," Clay says, handing him back his phone.

"Alright then. We can always get into Mementos and make more money if we need to."

With the heist deadline looming over their heads, a Destinyland outing sounds pretty exciting.

*

10/4 – SUNDAY – DAYTIME

"This is Cheng," Clay says, clapping a hand on her shoulder. "My classmate."

"H-Hello," Yao Yi says, waving timidly.

"Hello Cheng," Eret says warmly. "How are you doing on this fine day?"

“I’m okay.”

Well, Clay can see this getting awkward real fast. He clears his throat. “So, uhm, how’s the Phan-Site coming along, Cheng?”

“The Phan-Site?” Yao Yi’s eyes widen in shock, glancing from Clay to Eret. “It’s...It’s fine.”

“It’s okay,” Clay says. “He’s a part of the PT.”

Yao Yi sinks visibly in relief. “Oh.”

At that moment, a waiter delivers their food, setting the plates down in front of them.

“You’re a big fan?” Eret asks.

“Yeah!” Yao Yi’s eyes shine. “And you’re a member of the Phantom Thieves? The Student Council President?”

“Yes,” Eret says, shrugging. He truly doesn’t like it when other people call him that. “You run the Phan-Site, correct? Including those polls and forum board and everything?”

“Yeah,” Yao Yi says, already pulling out her phone. “So basically, what I do is...”

She proceeds to give Eret a comprehensive explanation of what exactly her role is in maintaining the website while Clay chows down on his food. He finds Eret quickly overwhelmed, totally out of his element as he struggles to keep up with the stream of words flowing out of Yao Yi’s mouth like rapids.

“I see,” Eret says, nodding. “Are other students very supportive of the Phantom Thieves?”

“Hell yeah,” Yao Yi says, practically sparkling. “You should hear what they say about you guys. There’re so many positive things I don’t even know where to start!”

“That’s good to hear,” Eret says. “Does that mean that most of you are suffering injustices?”

Yao Yi looks thoughtful at that. “Maybe. But they could just be jumping on the bandwagon since the Phantom Thieves are all the hype right now.”

“I see.”

The rest of the conversation proceeds exactly like how Clay predicted – it centres around the Phantom Thieves and the good they’re doing. Clay wonders if he should have introduced Niki first instead, because half the time Eret just looks like a fish out of water as Yao Yi rambles on.

By the time they say goodbye, with Yao Yi skipping off towards the train station, Eret appears more exhausted than he usually is. The fact that he seems more energetic after Palace runs speaks volumes.

“That was...I must say, it was very informative.”

“Informative? About what?”

“About how the students perceive the Phantom Thieves. Cheng did mention that there were several students who were the targets of bullying, of abuse, and that is why they have come to see the Phantom Thieves as their role models.” Eret drops his gaze. “I didn’t even know about those cases.”

“It’s not your fault,” Clay says.

“I could have done something about it,” Eret says, sighing deeply. “Perhaps, if I had taken action earlier...”

“It’s never too late to start,” Clay says. “Come on, Eret. There’s a lot to be done.”

Eret nods, and Clay can sense the determination behind that expression. The walk to the train station is silent, but it’s a comfortable kind of silence. They part ways at the platform, Clay waving goodbye to Eret as the latter gets on the car.

*

10/4 – SUNDAY – EVENING

“How’s things going with Zak?”

“Huh? We don’t...uh...we went to see a movie the other day...”

“Was it Netflix and chill or did you guys actually go to a theatre?”

“Oh my goodness,” Darryl buries his face in his hands. Clay cackles. “I said we *went* to see a movie.”

“Was it a scary movie?”

“Yeah. Honestly, it was kind of funny. I think Zak wanted to show off how tough he was, but he just ended up clinging to me, so...” Darryl laughs breathlessly. Clay isn’t quite sure whether that was a genuine mistake, or if it was all part of Zak’s master plan.

“Good for you,” Clay says, sipping at his drink. “Don’t you feel like a brave knight?”

“Well no. It was just a movie which Zak was so afraid of that I’m surprised he chose it in the first place. It’s not like I forced him to watch or anything.”

“I don’t think he was that scared,” Clay says. Then again, this is Zak they’re talking about.

“Speaking of which, why am I sitting here with you instead of him?”

“Oh, because he’s busy doing his art thing, you know,” Darryl says. “He needs to submit his piece by the fourteenth and the showcase is on the sixteenth. With all these Palace stuff he hasn’t got time to sit down and really work on it.”

“Well, it will be over soon,” Clay says.

“After we steal Lee’s heart, we’ve got exams to study for,” Darryl says. Clay’s eyes widen.

“Exams? What exams?”

“On the seventeenth,” Darryl says, swirling his Coke with a straw. “You’re hopeless.”

“Excuse me. I’m not even sure whether I wanna go to college yet.”

“But you see, if you fail, you’re getting sent straight to juvenile hall,” Darryl says. “I would think the stakes are pretty high.”

In the midst of all his Phantom Thief activities, he’s completely forgotten about the fact that he’s

still technically on probation. One slipup during the examinations and he's screwed. He's been reading regularly, still receiving messages about book recommendations from Wilbur from time to time, so his Literature and English shouldn't suffer too greatly from his lack of studying recently. He's always been good at math as well, so there's no need to worry on that front.

His Sciences, on the other hand...

Clay's forehead slams against the table, hands clapped together in front of him. "Oh great Darryl, please lend your aid in this time of need!"

"I haven't started studying yet either!" Darryl cries. "You should probably ask Eret for this."

"Let's have a study session again," Clay says, rubbing the sore spot on his forehead where it smacked the hard wood of the table. "I seriously, seriously need help with Bio."

"Well, sure. If I can make it. Let's hold it on the fifteenth or something," Darryl says, unlocking his phone. "I'll text the group."

They continue talking for a while longer, about the Phantom Thieves, about school, about life in general. Darryl leaves when he receives a text from Zak. He thanks Clay for the company and heads on over to the train station, leaving Clay to finish up his beverage.

Floris hops out of his bag and onto the seat that Darryl had occupied, tutting. "You may be our leader, but you have to be a good student too."

"That's rich coming from a fox."

"I'm a human. Trapped in a fox's body," Floris huffs. "How many times must I say that to get that into your thick skull?"

Clay laughs.

*

10/5 – MONDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

"That cake looks good," Floris says.

"You think so?" Clay stares at the cake in the window display. What kind of cake does Gina like?

Clay is all the way out here near Lara Stadium, walking along a street famed for its collection of confectionary stores. Clay's never tried any, but they all look delicious.

"Well, take a picture and ask the group or something," Floris says, diving back into Clay's bag as they enter the store. As soon as Clay sends several pictures to Gina's birthday party chatgroup of different flavours.

Darryl: her birthday's not for another seven days

Me: it never hurts to start preparing early

Me: especially since we're going to be stealing treasure on the 7th

Eret: he's not wrong

Eret: I hope you remember that exams are on the 17

Me: yeah yeah I know

Me: Darryl rudely reminded me ytd

Darryl: you didn't even know until yesterday!

Me: shhhh don't expose

George: we have exams on the 17???

Me: see im not the only one who's screwed

Harvey: George for someone who looks very put together you seem kinda dumb

Darryl: dream and George the class rep sent the schedule to the class group

Me: did they

George: ^

Me: oh crap they did

Darryl: see what did I tell you

Clay leaves Darryl, Eret, Harvey and George to their bickering and decides to exit the cake shop, much to the bewildered stares of the employees. As soon as he leaves for the station, though, he sees someone standing by the entrance to the construction site for Lara Stadium. Someone awfully familiar.

[Tubbo](#) stares at the wall of the construction site, at the "Danger" sign affixed to the metallic barrier. He doesn't look too happy, and Clay can guess why. Still, he approaches Tubbo cautiously.

Tubbo looks up when he arrives, a hand on the strap of his bag. "Clay? What are you doing here?"

"I was...uh, supposed to buy a cake," Clay says. Tubbo glances back at the Stadium. "How're you feeling?"

"I'm gonna be honest," Tubbo says, frowning. "I'm not feeling very good right now."

"Because of the competition?"

"I don't think I put in my best," Tubbo says, sighing. "What I mean is that I...I don't think I did my brother proud."

Clay opens his mouth to speak, then closes it again. He's not sure what to say. Tubbo had worked so hard for this, had probably slaved away at his computer into the late hours of the night, so that he can win the competition for his brother who could not.

["Beginning](#) navigation."

What was that?

"Clay. Oi, Clay!"

Something white flashes at the corner of his eye. He jerks his head up at Floris' call, only to find himself staring at what appears to be a crystalline palace stretching to the skies, gleaming ever so

brightly in the afternoon sun. What the heck? Where did that come from?

Tubbo must be seeing it too, from that stunned expression on his face. He turns to Clay and stumbles back. Clay steps forward, grabbing onto his arm, steadying him.

“Are you okay?”

“Y-Yeah, I’m fine,” Tubbo says, straightening his uniform. He peers up at Clay with the widest eyes Clay has ever seen. “Are you Clay?”

“I am. Why...?” Clay glances down at himself, and it’s only then that he realizes just why Tubbo is so shocked. What he had been wearing previously is now replaced with his Metaverse outfit, the green coat cloaked around his shoulders. His fingers graze the edge of his mask that sits ever so snugly on his face.

If he’s in his Metaverse outfit, then that means...a tail slaps at his leg, and Dream glances down to find Fundy standing there, paws folded.

“Is that a fox?” Tubbo stares at Fundy.

“I’m a human in a fox’s body,” Fundy says. “But you can’t really tell.”

“And why is it speaking?” Confusion is written all over Tubbo’s face. “Isn’t that the fox you always carry around in your bag?”

“Yeah,” Dream says.

“This must be some kind of magic trick, isn’t it? Are you trying to cheer me up?”

Dream doesn’t laugh. Tubbo falls silent. “Wait a minute. You’re wearing that kind of fancy outfit...Are you a...” Realization dawns on him, his jaw dropping. “Are you a Phantom Thief, Clay?”

There’s no hiding it now, not when Tubbo has seen everything, and *is* seeing everything. Dream shuffles.

“What if we are?” Fundy speaks on his behalf, eyeing Tubbo with suspicion. “Are you going to tell on us?”

“What? Definitely not,” Tubbo says, shaking his head. “You’re my friends! And I can’t sell my friends out like that.”

There’s nothing Dream can do even if Tubbo decides to turn them in. At this point, he can only hope for the best outcome.

“Tubbo? Tubbo? Where are you?”

Whose voice is that? It seems to elicit a gasp from Tubbo, who spins to face the palace...no, *Palace*. The new Palace that has sprung up in the middle of the Lara Stadium construction site. Could that voice belong to this Palace’s ruler?

Without warning, Tubbo takes off in the direction of the Palace, squeezing through a gap in the construction wall, footsteps thumping thunderously. Dream follows him, ducking to fit into the gap, the sides of the walls brushing his arms. Once he’s through, he runs down the winding cobblestone path leading into the Palace, an empty elevator car waiting for them.

“Tubbo must have gone on ahead,” Fundy says. “God, he’s fast.”

Dream and Fundy get on the elevator. Dream slams his fist on the arrow pointing up, and the elevator begins to move, rising high through the glass tube, plunging them into darkness until they reach the next floor, when light pierces through the car. The double doors slide open and Dream steps out.

The sheer whiteness of the room is blinding. Dream throws up an arm to shield himself from the glaring walls. They seem to be in a large exhibition chamber. Colourful posters are pinned to folding screens put up around the chamber, surrounding rows of benches in the middle of it. It is way more crowded than Dream would like, though most of the beings here are cognitive people rather than Shadows.

Speaking of Shadows...Dream glances around. God, if Tubbo is discovered and ends up captured...Dream shudders, the feeling of dread bubbling up in the pit of his stomach. He recalls exactly the chill that ran down his spine, the feeling of helplessness that seized hold of his limbs, that had rendered him completely immobile, Shadow Krones’ golden eyes boring holes into his.

“He’s a little further in,” Fundy says. “Come on, let’s hurry.”

Dream does not sense any Shadows around, only cognitive beings. He jostles past the crowds, making a beeline for the lone door at the far end of the room. The next chamber looks no different from the one before, apart from the fact that there are significantly fewer people here, giving them breathing room, and that there are three sets of doors, of which two happen to be locked.

Dream nudges the door open a crack, only to barrel through it when he sees Tubbo knelt on the ground, entire body slumped in resignation. Before him stands another...Tubbo? No, this boy is his brother. What was his name again?

[“Why](#) can’t you see the truth?” Tubbo’s brother laments. “Why must you hold fast to this fantasy?”

“I’m not!” Tubbo shouts. “I swear I’m not-!”

“Even now, you refuse to accept it. You still turn your eyes away from the truth.”

That boy is not Tubbo’s brother, Dream figures. He is simply a cognition of the Palace ruler’s, or hell, even Tubbo’s. Black sludge oozes from the wall behind the boy, morphing into their demonic forms before Dream even has time to blink.

“Tubbo! Watch out! Get back!” Dream draws his dagger just as Tubbo’s brother fades away, leaving the Shadows to deal with them. Dream summons Hell Biker, blocking the first ball of darkness that the Shadow hits them with. The Shadow is a grotesque amalgamation of colours and animal parts, hovering a couple of inches off the ground, its bat-like wings remaining eerily motionless.

[“Why!”](#) Tubbo screams, slamming a fist against the ground. “My name is Thomas! Not...not-! My name isn’t...That’s my brother’s name!”

Dream launches a fireball at one of the Shadows, only for it to shrug it off. Dream barely manages to parry its elongated claw, which would have definitely stabbed him through the gut had he been a few seconds slower.

“I...I’m not living a lie.” Tubbo staggers to his feet. “I’m not!” A surge of blue flame dances at his feet, growing fast and surrounding him. A faint shape flickers behind him.

[So adamant...](#) *Rather than accept a life in cinders...*

In a flash, Tubbo's uniform is replaced by a dark green coat, a long hood hanging behind him, yellow sleeves peeking out from under it. A thin, black belt wraps around his navy baggy pants that end in polished black dress shoes.

You'd strive towards splendor... Well, if those really are the shoes you've chosen... then we'll dance to the end...

"Whoa, what the-!" Fundy cries, spinning around. Even the Shadows have stopped attacking, their bodies angled towards Tubbo, as if analysing this new threat.

I am thou, thou art I.

A mask appears on Tubbo's face, black-and-yellow, reminiscent of a bee. A pair of antennas sprout from the top edge of the mask, rose-tinted glass spread over the eyeholes.

Accept this contract... the spell cast upon you...

["Cendrillon!"](#) Tubbo grabs the edge of his mask, ripping it off his face in the most dramatic fashion, his Persona taking form behind him. A slender figure sports a glistening sapphire dress, skin so pale and clear that it looks almost like glass.

Cendrillon does a twirl and snaps her fingers, pillars of light catching the Shadows unaware, decimating them in an instant. Ash swirls around their feet, remnants of the Shadows that had fallen victim to one of the most magnificent displays of light shows that Dream has ever seen.

Tubbo crashes to his knees, yelping as he hits the ground.

"Tubbo!" Fundy is by his side in a second, a paw on his shoulder, green magic curling around his limbs.

"Oh my God." Tubbo's chest heaves. "That was... What was *that*?"

"He's got a Persona," Fundy breathes. "Holy shit."

"Let's get out of here before more Shadows show up," Dream says. He holds a hand out to Tubbo. "Can you stand?"

"Yeah... yeah, sure," Tubbo says. Dream pulls him to his feet. Already, the groaning and chittering of Shadows are grating on his eardrums, drowning out the sound of Fundy's shout.

"Let's move!" They certainly can't take on so many with only the two of them. Moreover, they have an exhausted Tubbo to protect. Tubbo throws an arm around Dream's shoulders, a little difficult given the height difference, and they do their best to hobble out of there, with Fundy keeping them at bay with a wall of wind.

Dream whips out his pistol, blasting at any Shadow pouncing at them from the sides. The exit is in sight, the elevator car still waiting where they left it. The three of them pile into the car, Dream hurriedly slamming the down-arrow button.

Gods, the doors take their own sweet time to close! A Shadow's clawed hand shoots through the door. If Dream hadn't pressed himself flush against the wall, the Shadow would have snagged his coat, but the fact remains that he did and Fundy is able to slice the Shadow's limb off with a blade of wind. The elevator doors close, clanking shut, and the elevator is off.

[Tubbo's](#) face holds only a blend of terror and exhaustion as he stares at the spot where the Shadow's severed claw lies. It still wriggles, slowly disintegrating into dust as it relaxes and clenches.

It's only when the three of them have made it back safely to the entrance of the Palace that Dream retrieves his phone and activates the Meta-Nav. Perhaps the app would give him some kind of insight into whose Palace this belongs to...

Except, the app doesn't work this time. He has the option to exit the Palace, but the interface looks mighty dissimilar from what he's used to. The Full Name slot does hold the ruler's name, but each word has been replaced with a string of nonsensical symbols. Even the location and distortion are blank. What is going on?

"What in the world are those?" Tubbo asks, wavering voice still tinged with fear. "Can someone explain that to me?"

"Well," Dream taps on the "Exit" button, the familiar automated voice telling them what a good job they did, and the world changes around them. Their costumes disappear, their masks are gone, and the trio find themselves standing right outside the construction site.

"Let's not talk here," Floris says. He scrambles up Clay's back, perching on his shoulders. "Let's go to a café or something. I'm hungry."

Tubbo nods, mouth open wide in a sleepy yawn. He follows Clay down the street lined with bakeries and cafés, in search of a busy place to discuss Phantom Thief matters.

*

[10/5 – MONDAY – EVENING](#)

"So those things are Shadows, and you guys fight them when you steal Treasures?" Tubbo asks, wrapping his fingers around the steaming cup of tea.

"Yeah," Clay says. "That place we were in doesn't actually exist in the real world. It exists in an alternate dimension."

"So like one of those sci-fi shows?"

"Uh..." Clay never really considered what they've been doing "sci-fi" at all. It's just the simple activation of a function of an app that brings them to where they need to go.

"And I realized that I've just called the Phantom Thieves 'bad' in front of you."

Clay chuckles. "That you did."

"No wonder you support the Phantom Thieves," Tubbo says, drinking from the cup. "I always thought it was a little funny how you're such a big fan, you know? Because you don't look like the type to get in on the hype."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Nothing," Tubbo says, not even batting an eyelash at that. "Oh, and the app you're talking about...could it be this one?" He slips his phone out of his pocket and scrolls past his apps, before finding a widget with a design that Clay is well-acquainted with.

“That’s the Meta-Nav,” Floris says, and Tubbo jumps.

“Sorry, I’m not very used to a fox speaking,” Tubbo says.

“No worries,” Clay says. “So, um, now that you know all about the other world, can we ask, um...” How does he phrase this with tact?

“So, uh, Tubbo. How would you like to join the Phantom Thieves?” Floris asks.

“I figured you were going to ask me that,” Tubbo says. Clay downs the rest of his tea, a clump of dark leaves gathered at the bottom of his cup, anticipating Tubbo’s answer.

“I don’t think I can,” Tubbo says, shaking his head. “Sorry about that.”

“Oh...” Floris exchanges glances with Clay. “Any reason why?”

“I’m still the midst of the competition,” Tubbo says. “If I screw this round up, I could still compete for third place. I don’t think I can put my full effort into the Phantom Thieves until my competition is done and over with.”

“I see,” Clay says, nodding. “That makes sense.”

“I’m really sorry, though. You saved me from those monsters and now...”

“Oh, no, there’s no need to feel bad,” Clay says. “I totally understand. It’s not easy being a Phantom Thief and all.”

Tubbo’s phone rings at that point in time, a shrill sound that reminds Clay of his screeching alarm in the mornings. Tubbo answers the call, eyes lighting up at whatever the other person is saying.

“Sorry, that was my mom,” Tubbo says. “Apparently, they’ve cooked up a feast today to celebrate the final round of the competition, but, um, I’ve kind of fucked it up, so...”

“I think you deserve it, from how hard you’ve been pushing yourself,” Clay says. “I’ll see you in school, Tubbo.”

“Right then,” Tubbo says, slinging his bag onto his shoulders. “Bye for now!”

There is a skip in Tubbo’s step as he heads on over to the train station, leaving Clay with his half-eaten strawberry shortcake and his drained cup of tea.

“Well, we couldn’t get him to join now, but we can ask him later, right? He said he’d be freer once he’s done with his competition.”

“Yeah,” Clay says, staring at the tea leaves all stuck together in the cup. “We’re stealing Lee’s Treasure in two days anyway. I wouldn’t want to drag him into any hard fights since he not used to his new powers yet.”

“Then I guess we can wait till his competition’s truly over,” Floris says, climbing into Clay’s bag. Clay shoves the rest of the sugary treat into his mouth and heads out into the cool breezy evening streets of Lara, headed for home.

*

faith arcana rank 4 -> 5 MAX...? (Tubbo)
kindness +3 (housework)
emperor arcana rank 6 -> 7 (eret)
lovers arcana rank 8 -> 9 (bbh)

Spaceport of Greed: Life Will Change

Chapter Summary

boss fight chap!

Chapter Notes

im really looking forward to these next few chapters tbh!

welcome to my most hated boss fight in this game (madarame is a close second)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

10/6 – TUESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

Me: Is the calling card ready?

Clay leans back against his chair, waiting for George to finish up those last few problem sums before they head to the train station together.

Zak: yeah

Zak: im outside your school rn

Zak: quick people are giving me funny looks

Zak: they think im a weirdo

Clay snorts.

Nick: lmao

Nick: but you are one

Darryl: don't be mean to zak

Eret: oh looks whos here

Darryl: what

Eret: I didn't say it was you specifically

Harvey: im on my way

Well, it seems that things are going along nicely. Harvey can hand his father the calling card in the evening or tomorrow morning and they can go in straight after school.

“Right, I’m done,” George says, papers rustling as he packs up his things. “Let’s go.”

“I need to go back and study. Seriously. I can’t fail anything,” Clay says.

“Oh yes, the whole probation thing, isn’t it?” George says. “That must suck.”

“It does. You have no idea.”

They talk about everything and nothing at the same time, mostly about schoolwork and examinations and the long-awaited birthday party on the twelfth. They part ways at the station, Clay sending George off with an enthusiastic wave. At this time tomorrow, they’d be in the Palace, getting a hold of Lee’s Treasure.

And tomorrow, they will succeed.

*

10/6 – TUESDAY – EVENING

“The only thing I know is that the mitochondrion is the powerhouse of the cell.”

Nick frowns. “In that case, you’re majorly screwed, my friend.”

“I *know* that,” Clay says, huffing. “I’m gonna die on the day of the exam and you’ll have to scrape my rotting corpse off my chair.”

“We should just leave you there as a reminder of what happens to people who don’t study regularly,” Floris says.

“Oh shut it.” It’s not Clay’s fault he can hardly study when they’re committing the heist tomorrow. Besides, there’s going to be time to study after that. He tries to memorise three more pages of cell organelles and their functions, before totally giving up and leaving Nick to his own studying.

He settles into bed, scrolling through Twitter. Floris curls up beside his head, tail rubbing against his ear.

Clay surrenders to slumber around midnight, when the moon hangs high in the sky, surrounded by clusters of twinkling stars.

*

10/7 – WEDNESDAY – MORNING

“Father.”

Harvey knocks on the door and waits for a response with bated breath. Pinched between his fingers is the calling card that Zak had delivered to him yesterday. His heart thunders in his chest and his palms are growing clammy.

“You may come in.”

Harvey pushes the door open ever so slightly. He’s never usually allowed in his father’s office, so the splendour of his workspace has always been a strange sight.

“I found this in our mailbox,” Harvey says, handing the card over to his father. Andre Lee narrows his eyes and snatches the card from his grasp. Harvey gulps, standing by the door.

“Have you grovelled at Samson’s feet yet?” Lee asks, eyes scanning the words on the card. Harvey

can't imagine it's easy to read, considering the sheer number of different fonts and colours of each cut-out letter.

"N-No, I haven't."

"How many times must I remind you, Harvey, that your only worth as a son is to unite the Lee and Samson Groups?" Lee squints, before tossing the card onto his desk.

"Just who do they think they are, calling me a sinner?" Lee stands and reaches for his landline, dialling quickly. After a few rings, his call is answered. "Call the police immediately. I have something interesting for them."

Harvey's hand itches for his phone. Is this supposed to happen? What if the police finds out about their whole operation? He needs to contact the rest of the Thieves. Especially their leader.

"Don't let me down, Harvey," Lee says sternly. When did he get off the phone? His hands are behind his back, looming over him. "The fate of our future lies in your hands."

Our future? Or *yours*? Harvey can hardly believe the words spilling from his father's mouth. He can almost see a flicker of his Shadow, the ruler of the space station, in his father's place. The evil smirk, the condescending snicker. He smiles tightly.

"I won't, Father."

The tension in the air crackles like electricity. Harvey turns his back on his father and retrieves his bag from their maid, before heading out the door and settling into his limousine.

*

10/7 – WEDNESDAY – LUNCHTIME

"You remember to kill him, correct? Today."

"Yes."

"The time is right. If it all goes according to plan, then the Thieves can take the fall."

"Yes sir."

"Do not let me down."

"I won't."

Beep

*

10/7 – WEDNESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

Ah, the familiar scent of a heightened security level. Dream peeks through the crack between the door of the safe room and the wall. There are no Shadows about, which is rather surprising, given the sheer panic pulsing through the Palace.

Dream beckons his fellow Thieves and the eight of them rush out after him, heading away from the airlocks, towards the Weapons Line. The Treasure is now visible, a rounded device that does not look all too impressive, but if it's Lee's Treasure, then it must be important to him.

“Right then,” Dream says, striding towards the Treasure. This must be the easiest heist ever. He reaches out, fingers about to close in around the device when a mechanical hand shoots out from nowhere, grabbing the device and withdrawing at impossible speeds, retracting into a spaceship hovering over them.

“Crap!” Dream stares up at the ship. How did something so massive evade them? Shadow Lee’s laughter resonates through the chamber.

“In five minutes, I will be making my way to utopia. Don’t bother following,” Shadow Lee says, the smugness clear in his voice. The spaceship zooms off, moving further into the Palace.

“This way!” Navi shouts, and he begins to run down a new pathway that wasn’t there before, likely having fallen into place after Shadow Lee’s arrival. “We only have five minutes!”

What does that even mean? Going to utopia? Flying off with that device? Could it be?

“Holy shit!” TapL turns the corner and comes face to face with a furious, patrolling Shadow. He slices its metallic body clean in half with his axe and the Shadow bursts into ash.

“There’s a lot of Shadows ahead,” Eret says, “but I don’t think we can fight all of them.”

“Four minutes till launch?”

Dream’s suspicions are right on the money.

Eret’s right. There are just so many Shadows littering the corridor. They only have...what? Four minutes left? If they waste time with weaklings, they’ll never get to Shadow Lee in time!

“Deal with only the ones directly in front of you! Cut through them!” Dream prepares his pistol and sprints down the corridor, brushing past Shadows, flinching at the wisps of cold that travels up his arm. Goosebumps erupt over his skin as he shoots a Shadow through the face. The Shadow screeches before dissolving into ash.

In front of them lies a flight of stairs. Dream climbs them two at a time, only to get ambushed by a Shadow lying in wait at the top. He hasn’t had time to kill it before it transforms into a Girimehkala. He barely manages to dodge the swing of its sabre in time. Dream summons Mitra and does away with the Shadow before continuing his dash down the corridor.

“Almost there! Go, go, go!” TapL yells.

The door is indeed right in front of them. At Navi’s shout of “Two minutes!”, Dream punches the button at the side of the door and the large hunk of metal slides open, revealing a gigantic chamber where Shadow Lee stands with his back to them. He’s dressed in a spacesuit, his skin an odd blue.

[“What?”](#) Shadow Lee whirls around at the sound of their arrival. “How did you-?”

“Give it up,” Dream says, crossing the room with quick steps, stopping when Shadow Lee stumbles back, the device still clutched within his grasp. He looks nothing short of pathetic right now. The lack of defiance is...it’s a far cry from the previous Palace rulers. They’d usually put up a fight or something.

“Please!” Shadow Lee shakes his head profusely, hugging the Treasure to his chest. “Forgive me! I promise I’ll make amends! I promise!”

The rest of the Thieves move to stand by Dream’s side. Dream holds out a hand.

“If you really want to make amends, then you’d hand over the Treasure and return to your real self.”

[It is](#) only when Shadow Lee’s lips quirk into a vile smirk that Dream realizes something is wrong. In a swift move, he whips a remote control from a pocket and presses the button. Blue light flashes from beneath him and a cyan barrier is erected around them, crackling with high voltages. The only ones who managed to react fast enough are TapL and Fundy, also the two who happened to stand furthest from the middle of the trap.

“You fools!” Shadow Lee stands tall and strong, no longer a picture of the weak ruler that Dream had initially thought he was. “You think that I’m going to back down from my dream after I’ve come this far?”

“You’d even sacrifice your own son to do that?” Sapnap shouts. “Man, you’re seriously sick in the head!”

“I wouldn’t want a congressman like you in the government,” Eret huffs.

“And what are you going to do about it?” Shadow Lee mocks. Dream hates to admit it, but they’re rendered immobile at the moment, apart from Fundy and TapL, of course.

“Come stand by my side, my son,” Shadow Lee says. “You wouldn’t want to stay in the company of these peasants. You are destined to marry into wealth, Harvey, to live a life of luxury.” He turns to Fundy. “You as well. You had been betrayed by the very people you call friends, haven’t you? Don’t you harbour some resentment towards them? Can you still fully trust the Phantom Thieves who have left you to rot?”

Shadow Lee spreads his arms wide. “If you accept my terms, to leave your ‘friends’ behind, then I will let you onto my spaceship, and together we can rise to the heights of utopia!”

“Oh shut the fuck up,” Fundy says. He retrieves his slingshot from behind his back. “You’re getting really noisy.”

TapL steps forward. “If that’s your idea of luxury, Father, then I’m going to have to decline.”

Shadow Lee doesn’t look all that surprised. Instead, relief flickers across his face. “Very well, I-“

“A piece of shit like you only knows how to use people as stepping stones. You don’t even see your own son as a human being!” Without warning, Fundy fires from his slingshot, the pellet arrowing through the air, slamming into Shadow Lee’s hand.

Shadow Lee screams and drops the remote control, which TapL swoops in and plucks off the ground.

“Oh my God, I actually hit it!” Fundy gapes, staring down at his slingshot.

Harvey deactivates the barrier with a simple push of the button, the blue wall fizzling away. The Thieves step away from the barrier device just as Shadow Lee backs up till he reaches the wall.

“It’s a shame,” Shadow Lee says. “A shame that neither of you can see the benefits of my offer. He holds up a hand. “Guards!”

[Dream](#) leaps back as soon as four tubes snake from the ceiling, crashing into the floor, snapping iron and steel. From within, four robots appear, similar to the ones that they had seen back at the first few areas of the Palace. Shadow Lee summons a futuristic armchair, settling into it.

“Take them down!” Shadow Lee commands with a wave of his hand.

More and more robots slide down the tubes, and Shadow Lee lays his palm flat against the wall behind him. The wall parts to reveal an indent where he slides the device, the Treasure, in. The wall closes up once more, and Shadow Lee turns back to the battling Thieves.

“Taking off in thirty minutes.”

Taking off? So that device really was for his spacecraft, or whatever vehicle he’s riding to his so-called “utopia”. That means that they have thirty minutes to settle this and get that Treasure back before he leaves them behind. They’d never get the Treasure if that’s the case.

“Dream!” Navi’s panicked voice snaps Dream from his trance, and Dream ducks, barely avoiding the swinging fists of a worker robot. He kicks it in the middle and stabs it through with his dagger. The robot convulses and breaks down, a single spark flying from its eyes before it crashes to the ground and moves no more.

Fundy clears the last robot, dicing it with his wind blades like one would onions with a knife. However, relief doesn’t last long, not when robots clad in yellow suits start sliding down the tubes, each stronger than their blue counterparts.

“Twenty-five more minutes!” Navi shouts. “These ones are weak to Psi attacks!”

“TapL, with me!” Dream’s back bumps against TapL’s, Kaiwan and Milady flaring behind them. At Dream’s command, he and TapL launch a bout of pink and purple spheres, beating back the yellow robots till they’re groaning and writhing on the floor, sparks sizzling from their weakened bodies.

“Now!” The Thieves whip out their firearms, riddling the pile of scrap metal on the ground with as many bullets as possible, till the robots are nothing more than broken machine parts, ash and dust.

“You peasants don’t know your place,” Shadow Lee growls, holding up a hand. The sound of metal screeching has Dream glaring up at the tube, only to find more robots thumping to the ground, swaying as they stalk towards the Thieves. These aren’t the same type as those they had fought earlier but rather they’re a crimson red, tall and lanky, reminding him of the Chief Clerk back during their very first infiltration of this Palace.

“Twenty minutes!”

Dream darts away as one of the robots swipe at him. They’re faster and stronger. Definitely not weak enough to fall in one hit. Dream grinds his teeth, swapping Kaiwan out for Hell Biker, drawing up a wall of fire in time to stop one of the robot’s attacks.

“Weak to Frei attacks, Dream!” Navi cries.

Dream switches to Atropos, launching a series of fiery cyan energy balls at the onslaught of robots. He’s managed to take down a couple, while Fundy and TapL hack and slash at the rest. Bad and Skeppy fight back to back, launching fireballs and lances of ice at the onslaught of Shadows.

Another wave of Shadow Lee’s hand summons another wave of robots, easily cut down by the team, then another, a slew of beefy robots well-dressed in green suits. It has come to a point where they can no longer be destroyed in one hit, requiring several stabs before their blades or magic can puncture the thick plates of metal that make up their bodies.

“Fifteen minutes,” Navi reminds them.

The Thieves are getting tired from the constant battle, the lack of opportunity to rest. Bad's fireballs are now smaller to conserve as much energy as possible, and even Sapnap's electricity is losing its spark. Dream draws his pistol, pulling the trigger, only to find that he has exhausted his bullets for this fight.

Well, cue that robot fist that socks him across the face. Dream hurtles across the room, pursued by the attacking robot. There is a sickening crack as Dream's head smashes against the wall. Pain shoots through him. The world spins and the ringing in his ears just won't stop.

"Dream!" A pool of green light surrounds Dream, healing up his wounds, repairing what must have been a cracked skull and concussion. The sharp bang of a shotgun blasts the robot away from Dream. Sapnap holds out a hand, which Dream takes, and pulls him to his feet.

"You got a little too careless there," Sapnap says, turning back to face the robots. His ragged breathing and slight sway on his feet does not go unnoticed. Just how many underlings does Shadow Lee have?

"You there! Finish them! That's an order!" Shadow Lee fingers one of the robots, and the robot halts in its tracks, a hand held up to its head in salute. The rest of the robots begin to flee, hurriedly clunking away from its brethren.

"Navi, shield up! Now!" Dream screams.

Necronomicon's tentacles pierce through the metal of the floor, slithering up between the Thieves and the unmoving robot. Not even a second later, a mighty explosion rips apart the protective wall that Navi had thrown up. Dream is thrown off his feet, hissing in pain as a piece of shrapnel tears through his calf, blood oozing steadily from the wound.

What the fuck was that?

"You useless...you can't even kill seven kids and a stupid fox!" Shadow Lee hollers.

"Is that all you have?" Sapnap staggers to his feet, fingers still curled around his cudgel.

They've definitely got more than ten minutes remaining till launch. That was a lengthy battle, but with nothing can stand up to them when they've got each other's backs. However, the sneer that spreads across Shadow Lee's face sends chills down Dream's spine.

"Of course not," Shadow Lee says. He raises his hand again, and that familiar feeling of dread sinks Dream's stomach. "Come to me, Executive!"

The four tubes retract back into the ceiling, now replaced by an opaque tube even wider than the four of them combined. Dream stares in abject horror as a robot emerges from within the tube, its size on par with Shadow Kris' Piggytron. It towers over them, expressionless face unsettling.

"Don't kill the boy who wears my son's face. I want to save him for last." Shadow Lee smirks, shifting into a more comfortable position in his chair. The Executive blurts a string of incomprehensible noises and sounds, before pouncing at Dream, fist outstretched.

That thing is *fast* for its size! Dream barely dodges it, leaping away in time before the robot's fist crashes into the ground where he was just standing, obliterating a section of the ground, exposing the Shadows patrolling the floor below.

"Navi, weaknesses?" Eret shout, voice somewhat muffled by the din of battle.

“N-No weaknesses, but no strengths either!” Navi’s voice is staticky – he must be further away than Dream thinks. “Just hit it with your strongest attacks!”

A rush of strength flows through Dream as he is cloaked in an orange light. Dream summons Arahabaki just in time to block the Executive’s second fist. The Executive’s power reflects off Arahabaki’s magical shroud, forcing the robot back and giving Dream some breathing room.

A series of gunshots ring out through the chamber, drilling holes into the side of the Executive. TapL stands with his grenade launcher aimed at the Executive, Milady behind him armed to the teeth with her arsenal of firearms.

TapL shoots the first shot, the shell of the grenade soaring through the air straight and true, exploding upon contact in the crook of the Executive’s neck. Strips and bits of metal rain over them, slicing at Dream’s clothes and skin. It stings when hit with a cold rush of air, but Dream has no time to patch up his wounds.

That single attack exposed the Executive’s wires, the circuits running through its body and powering every move. If they can just find the main wire...

“Give them the Big Bang March!” Shadow Lee shouts.

“Dream, we’ve only got seven minutes left!” Navi exclaims. “And a big one’s coming!”

Necronomicon has already been severely damaged in that last attack, so they cannot rely on Navi for protection this time. Navi showers them in sparkles of blue.

“Someone throw up a shield! Please!”

Skeppy stabs his katana into the ground the same time Bad stomps hard. A wall of fire and ice dancing in harmony is erected in front of them. Dream summons Hell Biker and helps Bad and Eret supports the wall with his own brand of light.

The Big Bang March hits harder than expected, completely shattering the three layers of elemental barriers that they had put up. Dream goes flying, being the closest to the attack, crashing into Sapnap and sending both of them sprawling to the ground.

Fundy is bouncing everywhere, patching everyone up with a touch of Zorro’s magic. How the fuck are they going to deal with something this terrifying? In less than seven minutes?

“Dream! Cover me!” TapL makes a mad dash for the robot as the Executive recovers from that intense attack, rubbing at its fist, looking almost like a normal human in that one instant.

“What are you-?” Dream starts but stops short. If TapL has a plan, he’s going to trust him with all he’s got. Dream summons Unicorn – his stamina is already running pretty low – and constructs a veil of light that keeps the Executive at bay.

TapL spins on his heels, spraying up dust as he goes. As soon as he’s right behind the Executive, he casts his axe straight towards the Executive’s back with a formidable swing. The axe’s blade gyrates like that of a helicopter’s, connecting with the black and red wires exposed from his earlier attack.

The Executive robot whirrs to a halt, the light blinking from its eyes, as it tumbles backward, crashing onto its back. Dream drops to a knee, gasping for breath.

“Even the Executive...” Shadow Lee gapes, expression of shock and horror ever so satisfying.

“No! Guards! Come to me!”

The four tubes emerge again, and despair only fills Dream’s heart. There’s more? More to the onslaught?

“We have...less than five minutes.” Navi gulps.

No way. They have to take the Treasure back. It’s now or never...

Only one robot emerges from the tubes. Dream’s eyes widen as he takes in the robot’s appearance.

It’s a robot, alright, from its jerky movements to the fact that it is standing on one wheel and that its face only looks barely humanoid. Otherwise, it resembles TapL ever so strongly.

“That is how...he sees his son...” Bad breathes.

“Nothing but a pawn,” Eret says, apology in his tone.

“You are my son, are you not, Harvey?”

RoboTapL does not speak. Instead, it simply wheels itself back and forth, as if awaiting something.

“Then do as I say. Even if you have to sacrifice yourself, eliminate them!”

Rage courses through Dream’s veins as the world stains red around him. How dare he? How dare he just use his son like that with a total disregard for his feelings? His humanity?

“You motherfu-!” Sappnap summons Seiten Taisei and raises his cudgel high.

“No, Sappnap!” Dream rushes forward, but it’s too late. RoboTapL charges at them, screws and bolts falling from its limbs.

Dream thrusts himself at Sappnap, knocking the both of them to the ground. He ducks his head, hiding it in Sappnap’s shoulder as something cuts at him, ripping at his skin, drawing warm blood that gushes over his coat. Insane stabs of pain renders him unable to move, unable to speak.

Fuck. Shit. Fuck! It fucking *hurts*!

Someone is shouting his name. He’s rolled onto his back, several figures blurry against the whitewashed ceiling. Someone’s furry hands...no, paws...are on his head, a cloud of green washing over him like a gentle lap of waves against the shore.

Dream’s vision clears and he sits up, just in time to see TapL with the Treasure in hand, standing over Shadow Lee who’s on his knees, utterly defeated. The indent where the device had been is now empty, and the countdown has stopped.

[“Father.”](#) TapL says, shaking his head. “Why can’t you see that what you’re doing is...is wrong?”

“I’m trying to make our lives better!” Shadow Lee says. “If I become a minister, if I can enter the world of politics, we could have all that we want in the world! We needn’t worry about our finances any longer!”

“And you would sacrifice anyone and anything in your path to get what you want?”

“If that is what it took,” Shadow Lee says with a pitiful laugh. “The world is nothing more than a game of benefits and costs, Harvey.”

“You...” TapL sighs. “I want you to atone, Father. For all that you did to the employees. And to everyone else that you hurt.”

Shadow Lee purses his lips, but nods.

“Wait!” Dream shouts, stumbling over. “Have you seen a black mask? Someone in a black mask in your Palace?”

The space station is already beginning to crumble, the rumbling sounds of destruction ringing out through the floors below.

Shadow Lee fixes him with a strange look. “Are you talking about the assassin?”

The assassin? So this guy knows something about him after all! “Do you know anything about him?”

“No,” Shadow Lee says, shaking his head. “All I know is that one can request hits, and that assassin would take care of it for them. I can only believe that this assassination happened in this realm. I have not seen a single suspicious person, nor has one been reported to me.”

Not a single suspicious person. Dream glances back at the group of Thieves already piling into the Fundybus. Has the black mask stopped pursuing the Phantom Thieves’ targets? Or had those two instances been nothing more than coincidences?

“Thank you,” Dream says. Shadow Lee flashes him a grateful smile.

[“Come on,](#) let’s go,” Dream says, and gets into the seat beside Eret. The sudden drop of solid concrete behind them spurs Dream into a panic mode. “Go, go, go! Eret, move!”

“Oh my God, *quiet!*” Eret huffs, already stepping on the accelerator.

“Move! The place is coming down!” Navi’s voice is scratchy; he must have screamed too much during the fight earlier.

Bang!

Wheels screech as the Fundybus hurtles forward. Dream lurches back in his seat as Eret drives more skilfully than Dream usually gives him credit for. He dodges the pieces of metal raining on them like a pro. Dream has never been more thankful for Eret’s sharp swerves than in this one moment.

However, at the end of the corridor is an exit to a black nothingness. Fundy is the first to scream, then Bad and Skeppy. Then, as they barrel into the great expanse of space, the Fundybus is filled with terrified and exhilarated hollers alike.

*

[10/7 – WEDNESDAY – EVENING](#)

“Can you stop landing on me!” Clay digs his heel into Nick’s belly and kicks him off.

“Oh my God! I’m gonna throw up, you nimrod-“

“I’d like you all to stop landing on *me!*” Floris squirms out from underneath the pile of wriggling bodies. It’s a wonder how his bones aren’t all broken yet.

“Where’s George?” Clay glances around. Nick rolls his eyes.

“I’m here,” George says, dusting the backs of his pants. “Sorry, I think I landed a little far from you guys.”

“You got thrown out of Fundy?” Zak’s eyes widen. “Man, sucks to be you.”

George shrugs. “I know.”

Harvey stands to the side, a box in hand. Its cover depicts that of a model spaceship, reminiscent of the one that Shadow Lee had been hiding in when they first entered the Palace. This must be the Treasure.

“Father always wanted to buy this model set when he was younger, he told me,” Harvey says, eyes never leaving the box. “But my family was very poor then, so we couldn’t afford to spend on toys. I mean, I wasn’t born yet, but...yeah.”

“How much does that thing cost?” Clay asks. Zak is already on it, jaw dropping when he sees the results on his phone screen.

It is worth a whopping fifty million dollars. It was expensive even back in its time, but now, in the present, its price has skyrocketed to unimaginable heights. Clay wouldn’t even need to work a single day for the rest of his life if they could sell it for that much.

“I think I’m gonna keep it,” Harvey says. “It’s a reminder not to walk down the path my father did.”

There goes that dream, but Clay respects Harvey’s choice. Something with that kind of sentimental value must be extremely important to Harvey and his father.

“Well, that man knew nothing about who the black mask is,” Clay says. “But we can confirm now that whoever he is, he is an honest-to-goodness assassin.”

“Basically, the guy behind the mental shutdowns,” Floris says. Clay picks him up off the ground and deposits him into his bag.

However, Shadow Lee did mention something about requesting hits. If Harvey could just find out that juicy piece of information before his father confesses to his crimes...

He tells Harvey as much, and Harvey promises that he’d try to find out something if his father is willing to talk. Meanwhile, the rest of the Thieves should just continue on with their daily lives. Especially since, as Eret likes to remind them, that the examinations are coming up soon.

“I hate exams,” Clay says, yawning on the train back home.

“Same,” Nick mumbles, leaning his head against the wall, eyes shut.

Clay would have been lulled into a dreamless sleep if not for the fact that he’s still standing in such a crowded carriage...

For now, they will have to wait for the change of heart...and get past the exams while they’re at it.

Oh, and they have to start preparing for Gina’s birthday party too.

Knowledge +3 (studying)

Prepare for Destinyland

Chapter Summary

some daily life stuff that's not s links

Chapter Notes

took one major exam today and man ive been playing minecraft all day to unwind :)

chill chap tdy because ive been spamming social links too often im gonna run out before december

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

10/8 – THURSDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“Man, I love being friends with the president of the Student Council,” Nick says, stepping into the Student Council room with the rest of the Enderlands Thieves in tow.

“This *is* one of the perks,” Eret agrees, rubbing at the crook of his shoulder. Clay doesn’t blame him. He’s still recovering from the sheer amounts of physical trauma he just went through yesterday.

The Thieves gather around the squarish arrangement of several desks, dragging chairs stacked in the corners of the rooms and settling in them. Floris climbs out of Clay’s bag and sits on the table, smack in the middle. Clay slips his textbooks and workbooks out, placing them in neat stacks on the table. He has to learn something other than “the mitochondrion is the powerhouse of the cell” today.

Today is also the day he finds out that George is a very good teacher, leaning over his shoulder and stabbing his finger at keywords, pointing out the relevant concepts and techniques that Clay should be employing.

At some point in time, Nick leaves the room to refill his water bottle, claiming that there’s no way he can study with two lovebirds in the room acting like that. George gives him a weird stare, and Clay flushes.

“That’s it. I’m done,” Harvey says, leaning back against his chair. “Math will be the death of me.”

“So am I.” Clay’s head is spinning from all the weird terms and jargon that would only make sense to a biologist. Or George, from the way he’s laughing at Clay’s despair.

“Let’s take a break, then,” Eret says, “and talk about something you might want to hear about.”

“Like what? Are we getting inside info on something?” Darryl asks.

“Yes and no,” Eret says, shrugging. “It’s about Spirit Week.”

“It’s that time of the year already?” Harvey muses, chewing on his pen.

“Yes, apparently,” Eret says. “The faculty’s still getting questioned by the police and everything about the principal’s death. The school can’t do anything too fancy or else we’re just gonna draw attention to ourselves, so this year’s Spirit Week lasts two days.”

“A two-day Spirit Week,” Floris deadpans.

Eret nods. “That’s only because our annual festival lasts two days.”

“Are they going to do that thing again? The one where a famous celebrity is invited?” Darryl asks.

The door opens and Nick steps in, water bottle in hand. “What did I miss?”

“We’re talking about the school festival,” George says. “Spirit Week’s kind of cancelled.”

“Cancelled?” Nick looks utterly devastated, eyes as wide as saucers. “Dude, you can’t cancel Spirit Week!”

“We’re told not to draw attention to the school.”

“Wait, but the festival’s still going on, right?”

“Yeah. That’s the *only* thing that’s still going on,” Darryl says. Nick sinks back into his chair with relief.

“Good, because the rest of the activities suck. No offense.”

Eret sighs. “Quite sure you meant full offense.”

“So, when’s the festival?” George asks.

“On the twenty-fifth and the twenty-sixth,” Eret says. “There’ll be the usual stuff – booths, performances, the student sharing session...oh, we’ve got a dance floor this time round...”

“Can students from other schools come?” Darryl asks.

“I’ll...see what I can do about Zak,” Eret says.

“By the way, are we inviting Captain Sparklez again?” Nick asks.

“Not sure yet,” Eret says. “We’re going to have to get the students to vote.”

“Wait, what’s this about?” Clay asks.

“Oh, we have this thing where we invite celebrities,” Harvey says. “People will nominate and vote and whoever’s got the most votes will come and give a speech.”

“Give a speech? About what?”

“Anything, really. Well, it’s less of a speech and more about interacting with the students,” Darryl says. “A lot of people usually show up for that one.”

“We’ll put up the form for nominations soon,” Eret says. “Maybe a little closer to the date.”

Talk of the festival predominates over thoughts of studying. As it turns out, each class would have to run a booth – it could be anything ranging from games to cafés to fortune-telling...It sounds

even wilder than what he had at his previous school and honestly, Clay is quite looking forward to it.

“Do you think they’ll want to invite the Phantom Thieves?” Nick says, eyes sparkling, as Eret locks up the room for the day after their study session. “Then we can do an awesome identity reveal and everything!”

“Nope,” Clay says quickly. “No identity reveals. Did you forget that we’re actually wanted criminals?”

Nick pouts.

“Plus, a Phantom Thief’s charm lies in their mystery,” Floris adds. Eret twirls the keys around his finger as he joins the rest of the Thieves heading down the staircase, towards the school gates.

“Oh, right.” Clay is suddenly reminded of something. “Can we go into Mementos tomorrow? Does anyone have anything on?”

“Nope.”

“Nothing here either.”

“I’ll let Zak know,” Darryl says. “You’ll tell us details, right?”

“I’ll send it to the group.”

Harvey meets his chauffeur and butler at the school gates and waves goodbye to the group making their way towards the train station.

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10/8 – THURSDAY – EVENING

“The rain’s coming down pretty heavy.” Floris stares out the window. Clay is lying on his stomach, reading a book on unsolved mysteries of the world, the pitter-patter of raindrops against the glass pane a relaxing soundtrack.

“Yeah,” Nick says, Link on-screen launching a flurry of strikes against a menacing mechanical foe. He sneezes. “It’s cold.”

“What’re you thinking about?” Clay asks. Floris tears his gaze from the window, hopping to the floor and climbing up to Clay’s bed.

“Something’s just...bothering me,” Floris says. “I don’t know what, though.”

“Maybe some pieces of your memory are coming back,” Clay says.

“No, it’s something else.” He settles beside Clay’s pillow with his muzzle tucked against his paw.

“Well, you’ll figure it out eventually,” Nick says, before letting out the most ear-piercing shriek that Clay has ever heard from him. He guesses that Link probably just died. A peek over the railing of his bed confirms that.

Clay finishes his book, placing it back on the shelf amongst the other books he owns. He yawns and rises to brush his teeth, Ant purring and trailing behind him.

10/9 – FRIDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“That’s Niki’s mother. Mia Schneider,” Navi says.

Schneider’s Shadow does look ominous alright, what with the unyielding golden eyes and those black flames blazing by her feet. She cackles when they arrive, spreading her arms in challenge.

“What are the Phantom Thieves doing here?” she asks mockingly. “You can’t be here to change my heart, can you?”

“We are,” Dream says. “Just because Niki is your daughter doesn’t mean you can do anything you want to her!”

“What are you talking about, foolish man?” Shadow Schneider snarls. “Niki is my property! *I* gave birth to her! She belongs to me!”

“Niki doesn’t belong to anyone,” Darryl says.

“Don’t disregard her feelings just because she’s your daughter.” TapL draws his axe. “She’s not a *thing*. She’s a human being.”

“Shut up!” Shadow Schneider screams. “Shut up, shut up! You brats don’t know anything!”

The black flames wreath around her, obscuring Shadow Schneider from view. Emerging from the flames is a mischievous-looking demoness dressed in a tight-fitting white dress, bat-like wings hardly moving as she levitates several feet above the ground.

“I won’t let you have your way, you Thieves!” Shadow Schneider swoops in, claws outstretched. Dream meets her head on, parrying her strike with his dagger. He summons Hell Biker, countering with a wheel of fire. Shadow Schneider giggles and Dream ducks, the ball of ice she throws his way sailing past his head and crashing into the wall behind him.

“She resists everything besides Physical and Kou skills!”

Resists everything besides Physical and Kou skills? That sucks. Dream has only one Persona that has Kou skills, so he swaps Hell Biker out for Mitra.

“Eret, Fundy, Skeppy, with me! Everyone else take the weaklings!” Dream shouts. Drawn to the massive fountain of power exerted by Shadow Schneider, the smaller, weaker Shadows are beginning to arrive in droves.

Dream has a plan, but he would need cooperation from his team. He claps a hand on Eret’s shoulder, jolting the latter. Eret’s going to be the main player for this one.

At his command, Fundy leaps onto Skeppy’s shoulder, Zorro conjuring twin cyclones that rush Shadow Schneider. Skeppy follows up with a dash of shattered ice, razor shards swirling in tandem with the tornadoes. Chip damage is better than no damage.

With a flick of Shadow Schneider’s wrist, spheres of pure darkness homing in on Dream and Eret, soaring through the air at impossible speeds. Dream throws his arms up, body curling in on himself as he braces for impact.

“Milady!” TapL’s voice resounds from behind them, and Dream cracks open an eye to find the

spheres reflected back at Shadow Schneider, whose tough hide deflects them.

“Eret, now!” Dream claps a hand on Eret’s shoulder as Robin Hood nocks another arrow, power seeping from within his spirit into Eret’s. The arrow of light grows ever more fearsome, radiating such an intense aura that Dream is certain will eradicate anything standing in its path.

Robin Hood aims upwards and shoots at the ceiling, but it’s not just one arrow like Dream expected, but a rain of projectiles pouring from the skies. There’s absolutely no way that Shadow Schneider could have dodged that attack, not when even Dream and his team need Skeppy and Bad to magic a barrier to shield them from the rain of arrows.

When the chamber clears once more, Shadow Schneider has reverted back to her humanoid form, her contemptuous eyes darting from one Thief to the other.

[“Apologize](#) to Niki,” Dream says, squatting down so that he’s at Shadow Schneider’s eye level. “And repent for what you have done to her.”

Shadow Schneider looks downright pitiful right at this moment. She clenches her fists, only to unclench them. She sighs, long and drawn out. Her feet are already dissolving, tiny little winged creatures that spiral into the ceiling. While she may not be one for such words, she certainly knows when she’s beat.

Hopefully, Dream can once more see a smile on Niki’s face when she talks about her mother. Schneider’s Shadow is silent till the end, even when she’s completely gone.

[“Well,](#) that’s that,” Bad says, sizzling the final weakling Shadow beneath his feet.

“So, are we done here?” TapL asks, resting his bloodied axe against his shoulder.

“We can always drive around Mementos if you guys are broke,” Dream says, shrugging.

“Nah, I need my beauty sleep,” Sapnap says, yawning.

“And we need to study,” Navi points out.

“What in the world is ‘studying’?” Skeppy asks with a huge grin on his face, an arm thrown around Bad’s shoulders.

“You have your artwork to get back to,” Bad says, sighing. “By Wednesday, remember?”

Skeppy pouts, only to turn his head to peck Bad’s cheek. Bad’s face goes as red as the edges of his hoodie and shoves lightly at Skeppy’s chest. Good Lord, Dream wishes he didn’t just see that.

“If there’s nothing else,” Fundy says loudly. “Let’s get the hell outta here.”

*

[10/9 – FRIDAY – EVENING](#)

“Oh *God!*” Clay slams a palm over his eyes when he walks into the living room, where Nick and Mr Armstrong appear engrossed in their...in their...*horror movie*.

“Hey,” Nick greets with a wicked grin, a bowl of chips in his arms. “Wanna join?”

“No thank you,” Clay says, edging towards the staircase, all while keeping his eyes shielded from the television screen. He nearly jumps six feet in the air when a particularly loud scream resonates

through the living room.

“I insist, Clay,” Nick says, making a grab for Clay’s arm.

Clay screeches as icy fingers curl around his wrist. Mr Armstrong chortles. Clay bounds towards the stairs, phantom wisps of chilly tendrils twining around his forearm.

“Don’t scare him like that,” Mr Armstrong chides half-heartedly.

“It’s that month again, Clay,” Nick says, wagging his brows.

“Nope,” Clay says, shaking his head profusely. “Definitely not. Whatever you have planned for the end of the month, I’m *not* going.” Before Nick can retort, Clay flees up the stairs, only to see a pair of beady eyes staring at him from the end of the darkened corridor. His blood pressure spikes for a split second before he realizes that those half-lidded eyes belong to a friend.

“What the hell’s gotten into you?” Floris mumbles sleepily.

“Nothing,” Clay says with a gulp. “Nothing at all. Are you tired, Floris? Let’s go sleep.”

“As a matter of fact, I am,” Floris says.

“What are you doing out here anyway?” Clay scoops Floris up in his arms, the latter nestling happily. Freaking hell...Clay’s heart is unable to calm down after all that; he can still hear the blood coursing through his ears. He’s going to die of fright one day. He just *knows* it.

Well, needless to say, Clay certainly couldn’t sleep. Not even after Nick returns to the room, took a shower and washed up for bed, and fell asleep. Clay stares at the ceiling, ears on high alert, eyes widening whenever he hears anything out of the ordinary. Anything that isn’t silence.

When he finally does fall asleep, it’s in the wee hours of the morning, when the black sky begins to brighten with the sun’s rays.

*

10/10 – SATURDAY – EVENING

“You let me sleep for one whole *day*!” Clay cries. His mouth is open in a yawn the next second.

“Well, yeah,” Nick says, scratching his head. “I mean, you can’t say we didn’t try waking you.”

“You slept like the dead,” Floris agrees solemnly. “To the point where we thought you really *were* dead.”

“You and your stupid horror movies,” Clay groans, dropping onto the sofa. His stomach rumbles, his limbs feeling weak. “Get me food, you asshole.”

“This is the part where Darryl would say ‘Language!’” Nick tuts but saunters off to the kitchen anyway. “And you’re scolding me for letting you sleep!”

“Well yes.”

Nick’s laugh floats unfettered from the kitchen, followed by the ding of the microwave. The smell of cheese wafts through the air, and Clay’s mouth waters. Nick plops down beside him and hands him the plate, grabbing one of the sandwiches for himself.

The melted cheese is hot and nearly burns Clay's tongue but he still devours it because he is, honestly, famished. Nick is only halfway through his sandwich when Clay is wiping his mouth with a tissue.

"Dude, you're gonna puke."

"Indigestion, maybe. Puke? No way."

Clay's phone buzzes: a message has been sent to the Phantom Thieves' chat.

"What's it say?" Nick asks, leaning over Clay's shoulder, fingers covered in gooey cheese.

Harvey: hey guys

Harvey: the rent cant be extended

Harvey: but heres the thing

Harvey: fathers been a little unresponsive

Zak: wym

Harvey: he's been locked up in his office all day

Harvey: wouldn't talk to anyone

Harvey: is this normal

Me: that's what happened all the other times

Darryl: ^

George: I think we shld just give him a little more time? Gina took a while to come to her senses

Harvey: ooh I see

Harvey: ok im gonna trust you guys

Harvey: but also because father's not in his best state of mind

Harvey: the company partys gonna be postponed

George: wait so that means

Harvey: the parks free tmr

George: cool

George: gina's raring to go any moment now

George: shes gonna flip out when I tell her we're going to destinyland tomorrow

Me: WTF

Zak: HEY A LITTLE WARNING WOULD HAVE BEEN NICE

Harvey: I ONLY FOUND OUT ABOUT IT TODAY

Harvey: I TEXTED U GUYS AS FAST AS I COULD

Eret: guys shut up

Eret: so am I right to say that we're going to destinyland tomorrow?

Harvey: yea

Me: if gina wants to

George: she does

George: turns out shes been hacking into this chat and has reading all our messages...

Unknown number: surprise bitches

Darryl: LANGUAGE

Unknown number: don't be like that bad don't be a party pooper

Darryl: what does saying language have to do with being a party pooper you muffin

Me: ok guys can this wait when r we gonna meet up?

George: I think I can get the both of us to the train station at around...11am?

Eret: wouldn't that be a little late?

Zak: yeah don't rides usually have really really long lines

Unknown number: we're having the whole park to ourselves skeppy

Zak: how the fuck do you know that name

Darryl: EH LANGUAGE

Darryl: but im curious too

Unknown number: im gonna let u guys in on a little secret

Unknown number: AT LEAST TWO OF U HAVE UR PHONES BUGGED TAKE THAT SUCKERS

Unknown number: MWAHAHAHAH

Darryl: are you kidding me

George: u bugged our phones??

Me: I should be surprised but I really am not

Me: this is gina we're talking about

Harvey: isn't this some breach of privacy

Eret: whose phones did you bug

Unknown number: ehehe not telling ~

Unknown number: anywho see u guys at 11

Unknown number: Ta

“She’s really opened up, huh,” Nick says, gobbling down the last of his sandwich. Just how long did it take him to eat that thing? “And damn, she bugged our phones? Since when?”

Clay pinches the bridge of his nose. “Who knows? Don’t know, don’t care. Definitely with a listening device, since she knows our codenames now.”

“Oh well,” Nick moves back to the kitchen to wash the plate. “We’re going to Destinyland tomorrow and we’re going to have the whole place to ourselves! That’s a dream come true, man!”

“Right,” Clay says, but an uneasy feeling has made its home in the pit of his gut. Why is there this...this unnerving feeling clawing at his chest, threatening to tear down all that he’s ever known? If there’s one thing he’s learned from his forays into Palaces and Mementos, it’s that he should trust his instincts, no matter how bizarre his intuition.

Just what in the world is going to happen tomorrow?

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Chapter End Notes

Guts +5 (reading book)

Guts +3 (the horror movie part)

A Catastrophic Celebration

Chapter Summary

of birthdays and tragedy

Chapter Notes

WARNING: gore and mention of animal cruelty

welp this chapter marks a turning point in the story

things are going to be moving a little faster I think

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

10/11 – SUNDAY – DAYTIME

“Yo! Happy birthday!” Zak shouts, waving enthusiastically at the last two to arrive – George and Gina, the latter zooming over from the platform. The streets are surprisingly quiet apart from the cheers and festive music blaring from the theme park.

"Thanks!"

“Did you guys wait long?” George asks.

“We just got here,” Nick says.

“Darryl and I were here half an hour ago, but sure,” Zak says, rolling his eyes.

“Hey, you guys heard about the press conference?” Gina asks, glancing at each of them.

“What press conference?” Eret asks.

“Oh, right, I forgot,” Harvey scratches his head. “My dad’s going to have a press conference later. Said there’s something he needs to confess.”

“That’s probably the change of heart happening,” Clay says. “When did he say it is?”

“Tonight,” Harvey says. “Around...” He furrows his brows, glancing at the sky. “Eight?”

“Then we can celebrate the change of heart with my birthday,” Gina declares. “Have a romantic dinner under the starlit night, with fireworks in the background and a wonderful confession blasting from our phones.”

“That is the most eloquent you’ve ever been,” George points out.

“Oh shut up,” Gina huffs. She stabs a finger at the gates to the theme park. “I’m totally gonna feel like a queen in there. Let’s go!”

10/11 – SUNDAY – EVENING

“I’m stuffed,” Gina pats her belly, sinking back against her chair with a satisfied hum. “Man, this is top-tier service!”

“It’s only top tier because we’re the only ones here,” Nick says. “Just wait till they open it to everyone else.”

“So, Harvey, was it?” Gina says sweetly. “When can you book the park again?”

Harvey splutters. “I’m not going to embezzle company funds.”

“You don’t have to use company money,” Zak says, absently pinching at the Minnie Mouse headband that Darryl had forced him to wear. “You’re pretty damn rich yourself.”

“Or I could help you,” Gina says proudly. “You know, transfer money from Lee Foods and stuff... and no one’ll know it’s you!”

“None of that.” George stabs his waffle with a fork. “Gina, I’m not letting you get in trouble with the law.”

“By being part of the Phantom Thieves, I’m *already* in trouble with the law,” Gina says, wagging her brows. She glances at her phone and gasps. “Wait, it’s almost eight!”

“The press conference is starting soon,” Floris says. He paws at Clay’s pant leg, and Clay lifts him onto a chair.

The change of heart. The Phantom Thieves have worked so hard for this, to save Harvey from his fate, and the fates of the employees working under Lee who were unfairly treated. It’s now time to reap the fruits of their labour.

The Thieves gather around Gina as fireworks explode above their heads, scattering a plethora of colours that illuminate the night sky. Gina fiddles a little with her phone and pulls up a video of the live press conference. Lee has yet to appear before the table of microphones, the chatter by the audience deafening.

“Here it comes,” Gina squeals as a man walks up to the long table, flanked by police officers. Clay’s heart is pounding incessantly, his fingers tightening on the edge of the table as he leans over to watch the press conference.

“This is... This is Andre Lee, the president of Lee Foods,” Lee says with a choked sob. He fishes his handkerchief from his breast pocket and dabs at his eyes. “I have a confession to make.”

Harvey takes in a sharp breath.

“I have... I have done many wrongs in my life, and that includes underpaying workers, factory farming, the mistreatment of employees...” Lee ducks his head, shivering. “I demand to be arrested, to be made to pay for my crimes to the fullest extent of the law.”

“Oh my God, it’s happening,” Floris mumbles.

He raises his head, tears streaming down his cheeks. “I also wish to apologize to my son. Harvey, if you are watching t-“

[Clay's](#) stomach drops as the venue goes silent. Something's wrong. The rest of the Thieves can feel it too. The atmosphere chills, tenses, as Lee drops his head.

"Mr Lee?" one of the reporters ask tentatively.

Lee doesn't respond.

Then, he jerks.

Convulses.

Black spots drip from his mouth, pooling on the table as he coughs violently.

When Lee raises his head, bile rises in Clay's throat. Gina physically hurls the phone onto the table, breathing quick and fast.

Lee's face looks like that of an Eldritch abomination. Rivulets of black trail from his lips, staining his chin black. His eyes have rolled back into his head, white sclera visible, black goo bleeding from the corners. His mouth is open in a silent, terrified scream. Reporters scream, the camera is knocked over, falling to the ground with a heavy crash.

"What the fuck-" Nick starts. Darryl cups his mouth, eyes wide. Eret snatches the phone, but all that they're met with is a cartoon character holding a sign which reads: Broadcast Accident.

"What just..." Zak gapes at the screen. "What just happened?"

"Clay? Floris?" George turns to face the duo, brows furrowed, lips pulled down into a frown. Clay has no words. He has no explanation for what happened. He can only avert his eyes, staring at the black screen on Gina's phone.

"This is not supposed to happen..." Floris's voice is meek. "This isn't..."

The only one who has remained dutifully silent, besides Clay, is Harvey.

"You guys...I have to..." Harvey flounders. He rises from his seat. "I have to go back to the company. You can stay for another two hours!"

"Wait, Harvey!" Clay shouts, but Harvey has already taken off, his retreating back getting smaller and smaller as he races back to the entrance of the park.

[With](#) what has happened, the Thieves are certainly in no mood to celebrate. It is Eret and Zak who shepherd them out of the park, strained silence hanging over them, even as they part ways at the train station. Clay, Nick and Floris get onto the train bound for Jule Halls.

"What the fuck was that, Floris?" Nick growls. "What the fuck happened?"

"I don't know!" Floris cries, as distressed as the rest of them. "We did everything the same!"

"There's no need to fight," Clay hisses, glancing around. The commuters don't seem to have heard them, are actively ignoring them, or do not understand the context of their conversation. Most of them are chatting amongst themselves, about the press conference.

"I heard that a few days before this, that guy received one of those calling cards."

"No way! So the Thieves are behind this?"

“That was nothing more than a public execution...”

That’s not how Clay wanted this to go. He didn’t want to...not like this. He doesn’t want to be known for killing people.

“This must be one of those psychotic breakdowns...”

“Didn’t the principal of Enderlands die too after receiving a calling card?”

The principal received a calling card? That’s the first Clay has heard of it. He’s certain that the Thieves didn’t do it. Unfortunately, the girl who brought it up does not elaborate, still speaking to her friend about the death they had just witnessed. Nick grunts, teeth gnashed.

The final stop is Jule Halls, the only passengers left in that car the three of them. Clay’s legs are wobbly as he staggers out onto the platform. He’s got to discuss this with the others as soon as he can, as soon as they compose themselves.

For now, he needs time to think.

*

??/? - ??? – MIDNIGHT

“Welcome back.”

Clay rises from the lumpy mattress, shuffling over to the door of his cell, grasping at the icy bars, the chill seeping into him.

“My, what a terrible turn of events,” Igor says, chuckling in that low baritone of his. “However, one can only fall after they have reached their peak.”

They have reached their peak? “Are you talking about...about that breakdown?”

“What else?” Igor says, grin unsettling. “Overcoming hardships is essential to your rehabilitation, Trickster. I, for one, am looking forward to seeing how you will surmount this challenge...”

With a wave of his fingers, Igor sends wisps of light curling around Clay’s body. “To aid you in your journey, I will now grant you an even greater power when fusing Personas...”

Clay nods. If this is a trial, then he will not fail here. As they say, if there is a will, there’s a way. He returns to the bed and lays down, drowsiness washing over him.

Very soon, Clay is awoken to the shrill ring of his alarm.

*

10/12 – MONDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“The principal received a calling card?” Zak’s eyes are wide.

“I didn’t hear about any of this,” Eret says, arms folded. “The entire investigation has been kept tightly under wraps.”

“No wonder people think we killed the principal,” Nick mutters.

The Thieves save Harvey are gathered at George’s house, treated to a plate of scones and a pot of

Darjeeling. Gina hasn't come down from her room, having been cooped up in there since last night. Guilt claws at Clay. Today's her birthday but the incident that they had potentially caused has more than dampened the spirit.

"Yes, that's what the police had announced," Darryl says thoughtfully. "So they based it off the fact that the principal received a calling card."

"How did that happen, though?" George asks. "We did to Lee exactly what we did to Gina, right? And Gina's fine."

"Could this be the work of the Black Mask?" Floris asks. "This is his M.O., isn't it? Causing psychotic breakdowns."

"Dude, we were with Lee's Shadow until we stole his Treasure. How could the Black Mask have just...swooped in and killed him?" Nick asks.

"George, you didn't sense anyone besides the Thieves then, did you?"

George shakes his head. "It was just us, from what I can remember."

"If we are sure that the Black Mask had killed Lee's Shadow," Floris says gravely, "and if George didn't sense anyone else..."

"Then we can assume that the Black Mask has successfully infiltrated the Phantom Thieves," Clay finishes.

The room is so silent that you could hear a pin drop. If the Black Mask is one of them, then they would have been able to operate right under their noses. The Black Mask would know exactly what they were doing, would know their plans down to the very letter.

It would explain how they could have avoided their detection for so long...

"Let's not..." Zak says, raising a hand. "Let's not start doubting each other."

"Yeah, I don't think any of us could be the Black Mask," Nick says, shaking his head.

Still, the possibility is there, even if no one wants to admit it. Clay bites his lip and stares at the tabletop.

"I think we should...lie low for a bit. Let things settle down," Eret says.

"That's a good idea," Darryl says. "If we don't make a move, the Black Mask wouldn't be able to either, since they seem intent on following us around."

Following them around?

["Then](#) let's focus on exams," Clay says. "We can think about what to do after that."

"In the meantime, we can listen out for any rumours or anything," George says.

Clay drains the last of his tea. "Right then. We can go home and have some rest for now. I'll let Harvey know about what we discussed."

George sees them to the train station, waving goodbye from the platform. Clay watches until he's out of sight. Nick has grabbed the both of them a seat at the end of the car. He hugs his bag, head leaned against the window of the carriage.

No matter how Clay tries to ignore those unsavoury thoughts, the idea that the Black Mask could be one of them sends shivers down his spine.

*

??/? - ?? - ??

“I see. So you suspect that this mysterious Black Mask was behind the murders, yet you did not know their identity,” Mrs Armstrong says, leaning back against her chair and folding her arms.

“We didn’t know who it was *then*,” Clay insists.

“*Then*, so you know who it is now?” Mrs Armstrong looks impressed. She does not question him any further. Instead, she closes her file and from within her purse, she retrieves something that looks all too familiar.

“Your next target was someone I’d like to think you were close to,” Mrs Armstrong says, placing the blood-red and black calling card on the table, sliding it over to Clay.

Clay stares at it. He remembers the exact words they had put on it; the message entirely crafted by Blade, but he was the one to deliver it to its recipient.

An arrow of pain stabs at his temples. He winces, willing the ringing in his ears to go away. Mrs Armstrong must have noticed, because her next words are quieter, more subdued.

“Tell me, Clay,” Mrs Armstrong says. “Why did you decide to steal my heart?”

Chapter End Notes

Fool arcana rank 5 -> 6 (phantom thieves)

Judgement arcana rank 3 -> 4 (igor)

The Aftermath

Chapter Summary

what happens after the tragedy - preparation for exams

Chapter Notes

hello im back

im wearing a hoodie at 27 degrees Celsius (80 degrees Fahrenheit) can u believe it

does anyone else have math anxiety or is it just me

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

10/13 – TUESDAY – MORNING

“Hey, did you hear?”

“About what happened yesterday?”

“Yeah, I heard the Phantom Thieves were behind it. Honestly, I didn’t think they’d actually kill anybody.”

“We should have expected that after what happened with the principal, though.”

Clay’s heart clenches. Now everyone’s blaming them for the mental shutdowns. He settles into his seat, slumping all over the table. A finger prods at the crown of his head.

“What is it?” Clay mumbles, raising his head only for a phone to be shoved into his face.

“Harvey wants to meet after class,” Darryl says, “so he’s asking for all of us to gather at somewhere in school.”

“Zak can’t come in, though.”

“He probably could,” Darryl objects. “I could just pick him up from the gates. Bring him an extra tracksuit or something.”

Clay hums. Harvey hadn’t contacted them since...since he left yesterday. The Thieves’ group chat had been abnormally quiet, lacking the usual bullshit that Zak or Nick would usually initiate at night. Everyone had needed time off to let everything sink in, to reflect on the event.

He wonders what Harvey would have in store for them. New information pertaining to the identity of the Black Mask? Or something else? His foot taps to an earworm's rhythm, choosing to stare out the window at the golden and red leaves rustling in the autumn breeze.

The clock's hands have never moved so slowly in his life.

*

10/13 – TUESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

Clay looks up at the jangle of keys. Eret strides down the corridor, moving to unlock the door to the Student Council Room. Nick stands from where he's perched squatting by the door.

"You guys are here early," Eret says.

"Yeah," Nick says, stretching. "We were just studying in the library."

"Where're the rest?"

"I think Darryl went to fetch Zak," Floris says. The four of them file into the Student Council room.

"And George has some work-related stuff to attend to," Clay says. "I don't know where Harvey is."

"Neither do I," Eret says. "He wasn't present in class today."

"Probably had to deal with company stuff," Floris mumbles. "I hope he's okay."

Darryl arrives with Zak a few moments later, the latter still in his school uniform, paint splattered all over the front. George enters the room not long after that with hurried apologies. Now the only person that's left is the man of the hour.

Thankfully, they don't have to wait long for Harvey shows up five minutes after George does, no longer dressed as impeccably as he usually is, with his shirt untucked and rumpled pants.

"Are you alright?" Darryl asks.

"I'm...I'm fine. Thanks for worrying," Harvey says, forcing a smile. "But, um, I've got a question for you guys."

"What is it?" Clay asks.

"Did you guys target the principal?"

"Did we...?" Clay repeats, then shakes his head. "No, we didn't."

"I see," Harvey says.

"Is this about the calling card they found at the principal's?" George asks.

"Yeah," Harvey says, a hand on his nape. "After all we've been through, I shouldn't suspect you guys, but..."

"It's fine," Clay says. "I understand."

Harvey's shoulders slump in relief. He takes the last remaining seat beside George.

"Can I say something?" Darryl asks.

"Sure." What could Darryl have in mind?

"I think," Darryl says with a frown, "that things are moving a little too fast after...after Lee's death."

"What do you mean too fast?"

"They're already calling us murderers, that's what he means," Zak says. He places his phone on the table, open to the Phan-Site forum. Comments and messages fly by at lightning speeds, too fast for Clay to read them all.

"So everyone's...turning on us?" The colour drains from Floris' face.

"It seems that way," Eret says.

"Haven't the public believed in us until now? This doesn't make any sense!" Nick snarls, slamming a fist on the table. Clay jumps.

"People are quick to turn on others, especially since they don't know our side of the story," Darryl says, sighing. "But don't you see how everything's, like, moving really fast?"

"Like how?" Harvey asks.

"Like everything's been staged," Eret says, catching on quickly.

["Staged?"](#) You mean we've been set up?" Clay asks.

"By the Black Mask, the true culprit," Floris says. "Maybe they staged it such that people would believe that the Phantom Thieves are the ones behind all the mental shutdowns."

"You mean like from February and March?" Nick asks.

"I don't know when the first shutdown happened, but yeah. They're trying to blame us for every single one of their crimes."

"We can't just assume that," George says. "We don't even know what the Black Mask wants."

"Maybe," Eret says, "but it is a distinct possibility that we've fallen right into their trap."

The room falls silent.

"I...We'll think about that," Clay says. "We can go back and think about it, but let's discuss more after the exams, okay?"

"Man, exams at a time like this is..." Nick trails off, sighing.

The Thieves leave that day feeling less than satisfied and more mortified than anything. They were dancing like puppets at the end of a puppeteer's string.

Clay hates to admit it, but the Black Mask has won this round.

10/13 – TUESDAY – EVENING

A movie plays on-screen, but neither Nick nor Clay is watching. Their bodies are present, but their minds have wandered off elsewhere.

“Dinner’s ready,” Mr Armstrong calls from the kitchen. “Nick, go and get your mother.”

“Right.” When was the last time Mrs Armstrong had actually been home to join them for dinner? When she did come back, late in the night, Clay has to add, it had only been to head right up to her office, laptop in tow. She’s gone in the wee hours of the morning, before the entire family wakes up.

Clay switches the television off and heads on over to the kitchen to help set the table. Nick has left to call his mother.

The atmosphere is sombre during dinner. Nary a word passes between them, only the clink of cutlery and the occasional slurping of soup.

“I won’t be back for the next few days,” Mrs Armstrong says. “I’ve just been offered a promotion if I can capture the Phantom Thieves.”

“But you’ve been working so hard,” Mr Armstrong says, sounding awfully disappointed. “You’d have to take care of yourself, honey.”

“I have to do this,” Mrs Armstrong says softly, but it sounds like she’s trying to convince herself more than she is the family. “It’s something I have to do.”

Clay nibbles at his spoon. With the most recent murder that has been blamed on the Phantom Thieves, it’s no wonder that the pressure on the lead investigator is mounting. Clay has got to do something to resolve this quickly, for the sakes of both parties involved.

Mrs Armstrong retreats to the room after washing up, her steps clumsier, more tired. Mr Armstrong heads up as well, saying something about having to convince her to take a few days off, leaving Clay and Nick with the cleaning up.

Clay buries his face into his pillow that day, head sinking into his pillow like a stone in water. Floris is already asleep, body rising and falling rhythmically with his breaths.

For the first time in his life, however, Clay has absolutely no idea what to do.

*

10/13 – TUESDAY – LATE NIGHT

Yao Yi: This is preposterous!

Yao Yi: How could they ever think that the Phantom Thieves are behind this?

Me: Why do you trust us so much?

Yao Yi: The Phantom Thieves I know won’t kill people!

Yao Yi: No matter what happens, just know that you will have my support!

The conversation ceases then and Clay lays back down on his bed. He can’t sleep, assaulted by a bout of insomnia. Another message pings on his phone, and he takes a quick glance.

Tommy: Big man

Tommy: oi don't ignore me dickhead

Tommy: everyone whos saying you killed that man is a wrongun

Tommy: theyre all ignorant bitches

Tommy: oh and manifold says hi

It's as if a weight has been lifted off Clay's chest. He snuffles, one hand wiping at his eyes as he clutches his phone to him. That night, he falls asleep with his phone against his chest, face wet, exhaustion pulling his body into the deep recesses of slumber.

*

10/14 – WEDNESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

"It's terrible, what happened to the CEO of Lee Foods."

Clay crunches down on his energy bar, the sweetness of strawberries filling his mouth. "It is."

"Still, despite what everyone is saying, I don't believe that the Phantom Thieves are behind it," Dr Montgomery says, tapping her pen against her clipboard. "From what I have been seeing, they've only made their targets confess and not outright kill them."

Glad to know that they have Dr Montgomery's support as well, even if she doesn't know their true identities.

"Just wondering, Doctor," Clay says, stopping mid-chew. "Why are you so invested in your...your research?"

"It's to help people, of course. What more could I need?" Dr Montgomery says with a gentle smile. A moment of silence passes between them before she shakes her head. "Well, actually...that's not entirely true."

"You have a personal reason?"

"Well, sort of," Dr Montgomery says, shifting in her seat. "Before I became a counsellor, I had... someone I was very close to and something terrible happened to that person."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Dr Montgomery says, waving dismissively. "It's just...she was in agony, a lot of mental trauma that she could not speak up about because it would invite too much pain. I wanted to help her. That's why I started my cognitive psience research."

Looking at Dr Montgomery's forlorn expression, her sorrowful gaze cast down at her cup of tea, that Clay must have dredged up terrible memories for her. She laughs awkwardly, placing her clipboard down on the table.

"Well, you're almost done, right?" Clay asks, trying to lighten the mood after he's brought it down. "You'd be able to help her soon."

Dr Montgomery flashes him a smile. "Thanks, but she's moved on already. I just...don't want that to happen to anyone else ever again."

Dr Montgomery has confided in him about her past, her problems – an indication of trust, he'd like to think.

“Thanks for your help today. I suspect that I would be done by next week or...” She thumbs at her chin. “Maybe after your exams.”

“I'm looking forward to it.”

Clay leaves the nurse's office that day with his spirits heightened just that little more. And anticipation. Anticipation for Dr Montgomery's stunning conclusion to her research after so many months.

*

10/14 – WEDNESDAY – EVENING

Tubbo: hey big man

Tubbo: how ar you doing

Tubbo: dont let what other peepul say get you down

Tubbo: you guys didnt kill them

Tubbo: I know that much

Clay's chest fills with warmth as he types a message quickly to Tubbo, thanking him for the support. He's received messages from other people as well, including Joel and Phil.

Joel: hope you're doing alright

Joel: my clinic's always open if you need a checkup

Joel: you know, if you get hurt on your heists and all that

Joel: I won't ever sell you out, I promise

Clay responds to him, telling him not to worry and that they're fine. He'd drop by sometime soon to top up their medicine stores.

Phil: Just wanted you to know that I wouldn't think you're a murderer

Phil: you're a good kid

Phil: so chin up! I'll always be supporting you!

Clay fires off a text to Phil too, before plugging his phone in to charge. He's never expected to receive so many messages, sending their support to him, even if it's over instant messaging.

Maybe...he's feeling that they can get through this, if they believe hard enough.

*

10/15 – THURSDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“You called?” Clay asks, managing to find Niki in the library, her books and worksheets spread out on the table. He plops into the seat opposite her, placing his bag down on the other unoccupied

chair.

“Yes, I know there’s no club activities today, but I’d like to tell you that the Phantom Thieves really did answer my call!” Niki looks excited. “It’s as if my mother changed overnight. She’s been really nice to me and everything.”

Clay’s lips morph into a small smile. At least there’s evidence that the Phantom Thieves are still doing good sitting right in front of him.

“I really have to thank the Phantom Thieves,” Niki says, clapping her hands together. “Do you think they read the posts on the Phan-Site?”

“Maybe,” Clay says, shrugging.

Niki frowns. “Why do you look so down?”

“Well, my friend’s father died a few days ago.” Clay sighs. “And, um, exams are coming up and the pressure is a little…”

“Intense?” Niki looks concerned. “Would you like to talk about it?”

“No, it’s fine,” Clay says, forcing a smile that probably doesn’t look too convincing, judging by Niki’s unchanged expression. “I’m okay. I’m glad you’re free from Derek and your mother’s abusive ways.”

Niki flashes him a smile. “Thanks for worrying, but you should take care of yourself too. If there’s anything I can help you with, don’t hesitate to ask!”

Clay ends up studying with Niki for a while before heading home. Niki’s happy thanks to the Phantom Thieves. She’s happy because they changed her mother’s heart, as they did many others before her.

Why can’t the public see that?

*

10/15 – THURSDAY – EVENING

“I can see three careless mistakes here already,” Floris says, pawing at Clay’s worksheet. Clay lets out a groan of frustration.

“Can you, like, go bother someone else?”

“But you have the most entertaining responses.”

“You get more entertaining responses when you curse at Darryl.”

“Language!”

“I didn’t curse! Yet!”

“Oh my God.” George’s forehead thumps against the table. “I’m gonna die in two days’ time.”

“So am I,” Harvey says, sighing. “I don’t get anything.”

“I can feel my soul ascending,” Clay says. “Okay, let’s take a five-minute break.”

[“We just](#) started half an hour ago,” Eret points out.

“Half an hour is plenty,” Nick says.

“Sucks to be you guys,” Zak says, leaning back against the cushy seat of the booth. He’s already submitted his art piece for his competition, so he’s more or less entirely relaxed. “I can’t scroll anymore. I’m just going to see something stupid.”

Darryl and Eret continue to study while the rest of them abandon their work. Clay sips at his coffee, a bitter Americano, unwilling to study but also not quite certain he wants to scroll through social media right now.

“If Mr Markus Singh is elected, he will also ensure that the youth of today...”

“Oh my goodness, it’s so noisy,” Darryl mutters, pausing in his writing to gulp his iced chocolate down.

“The election’s getting nearer after all,” Eret says. “I heard Markus Singh is already going to win.”

“Are you serious?” Nick mutters. “Of all people?”

“I get bad vibes from that guy too,” Zak says, sketching something on Darryl’s foolscap pad. It appears to be a very realistic bird.

“Why? What’s wrong with him?” Harvey asks.

“Straight up rude, thinks he’s above everyone else,” Nick says, shrugging. “Not like he’d show that side of him in public.”

“We bumped into him at the buffet, right?” Clay asks.

“You bumped into a politician at a buffet?” Eret repeats, raises a brow.

“It was during our first celebration,” Floris says. “We went to the toilet, was about to head back down to meet up with Darryl when this guy just hogged the elevator. Yeah, I think that was Singh.”

“If that guy becomes our next President our country’s gonna go up in flames,” Nick says.

“I’m sure it won’t be that bad,” George says. “He may be a shitty person but he might know a thing or two about running a country.”

Nick grunts and downs the rest of his coffee in one gulp. Clay stares out the window, at a newspaper stand stationed just across the pavement. On the front page is the logo of the Phantom Thieves staring back, mocking him.

Clay tears his eyes from the newspapers and decides to get back to his schoolwork, the only distraction from this crisis at the moment.

*

[10/15 – THURSDAY – LATE NIGHT](#)

Wilbur: I believe the Phantom Thieves would not stoop to such levels

Wilbur: Whoever done it must have tried to frame your group

Wilbur: You have my firm support till the very end.

*

Ruby: Hello!

Ruby: are you okay?

Ruby: the news has been saying you've killed someone

Ruby: but I don't believe that one bit! And neither does Jude!

Ruby: stay safe and rest well!

*

10/16 – FRIDAY - AFTER SCHOOL

“Oh my God, you actually came,” Zak cries. Clay rolls his eyes.

“You forgot to send me the details, you ass,” Clay huffs. “I had to text Darryl last night.”

“Right, right, my bad,” Zak says, scratching his head. He gestures towards what appears to be a crowd gathered in front of an artwork. The swirls of black and red look oddly familiar, but now, there is a bright splash of white and yellow and beige, forming a beautiful gradient within itself and a stark contrast to its darker surroundings.

“You modified your previous painting?”

“Yeah,” Zak says. “Now instead of just Desire, it's *Hope* and Desire.”

So Hope is represented by that new addition, that new orb of colour that looks positively glowing. Clay can almost sense something, *feel* something from the painting. It draws him in like a moth to a flame, and he finds himself approaching the art piece to get a better look.

It's certainly unlike what he'd expect from Zak, not something that tells the story of darkness and light, something that depicts the dependence of one on the other, like yin and yang. He can stare at this piece forever.

“This is a beautiful painting.”

Clay jolts, turning his head to find a familiar man standing beside himself and Zak. It's Rossi, the director of the Youth Art Foundation.

“Wait, what?” Zak looks confused.

[Rossi](#) continues to inspect the painting more thoroughly, given that the crowd has thinned. Clay shuffles to one side, such that he isn't interrupting the duo.

“While your technique has remained steady, I daresay that you have captured the very essence of both Hope and Desire in this painting,” Rossi says, nodding approvingly. “If you don't mind me asking, how did you improve in such a short span of time?”

“Because I decided that money and passion aren't mutually exclusive,” Zak says bashfully. “And painting for someone else is...it's a new thing, but I don't think it's all bad.”

Rossi chuckles. "I see. Hope and Desire. Beauty and ugliness that can coexist within us humans." He laughs heartily. "Forgive me for this ploy of mine, young artist."

"Your what?" Zak tilts his head in confusion.

"My ploy to encourage you," Rossi says. "To be able to help one who has escaped Marion's clutches, at the very least."

"You know Marion?" Zak splutters. "I mean, you know *know* her?"

Rossi nods. "We go way back. We were classmates, then became art teachers at the same school. She's always had a noble spirit, claiming that she'd reach the top of the art world one day." He sighs. "Even so, the art world has its own politics – only the cunning win. Goes to show that not even the human can be exempt from this blend of good and evil."

The human heart is capable of both; that's what Clay thinks. The human heart house both black and white, and one cannot exist without the other, which is why one can harbour both strong desires and hope.

"You know, I was quite surprised that she took you in," Rossi says, raising his head to meet Zak's eyes. "Marion was never one for children, you see."

Zak drops his gaze. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"One night, I received a panicked call from her, that all the nearby clinics were closed and that her child had come down with a fever."

Deep down, despite what Marion had done, perhaps she *had* cared for Zak after all, like a mother would her son.

"I don't want any more losers like myself or misguided winners like Marion, and that's why I started this Foundation," Rossi says. He extends a hand. "So, would you like our support? Without the overbearing market production, of course."

Zak gives his answer without hesitation, a reply that he probably put much thought into.

"No thanks," Zak says, shaking his head and stuffing his hands into his pockets. "I'm sure as hell not Marion and I won't let myself be corrupted by desire. And I have these great friends with me now." He pulls on Clay's arm. Clay stumbles forward, hissing at Zak, much to Rossi's amusement.

"If I'm gonna go down the wrong path, these guys will be here to pull me back onto the right one," Zak says, glowing with pride.

Rossi seems to think for a while, then nods. "I understand. Your friends are your shining beacon of hope. Marion has a good eye, it seems."

He tips his fedora and leaves with an amicable wave.

"That's one strange man," Zak says, watching as he goes.

"You declined his offer," Clay says. "I think you're weirder."

"Nah. You're the weird one."

"What? Why?"

“For...” Zak’s folds his arms, head lolling so he’s looking at the ceiling. “For saying I’m weird.”

“Oh my God.”

“What?”

Clay leaves earlier, having to head back to prepare for his examinations tomorrow. Zak wishes him luck and a “I’d hate to be you right now” as Clay pads down the stairs, making his way towards the train station.

*

10/16 – FRIDAY – AFTERNOON

“Why do we have to have exams on a Saturday of all days?” Clay whines, slumped all over the dining table, Nick sitting opposite him buried in notes and worksheets.

“Because of the stupid investigation,” Nick says. “That’s what Eret said. I asked the same thing as you.”

“So? Hold it on a Monday or something!”

“Can’t. The school’s on a tight schedule.”

“A tight schedule of what?” Clay all but screeches.

“The two-day Spirit Week,” Nick snickers.

“Speaking of which, it’s on a Sunday too!”

“Tight schedule.”

“Of what!”

Nick bursts into laughter and Clay sighs.

“Hey, who do you think the Black Mask is?” Nick asks, once he’s calmed down some.

“I don’t wanna suspect anyone.”

“No, but, like...I’m sure you do,” Nick says, putting his pen down on the table with a clack. “I just want to know what you think.”

“I don’t,” Clay says firmly. “I trust all of you with my life.”

Nick hums but doesn’t pursue the topic. Clay doesn’t want tension to arise within the group. Not like this, suspecting that the person you’re standing right beside could put a gun to your forehead and press the trigger without hesitation and a sick smile on their face...

Clay heads up to bed early that day, now unable to get the thoughts of the Black Mask’s identity out of his head.

He has exams tomorrow too, dammit.

same dream same i have a stats exam tomorrow too

Councillor arcana rank 6 -> 7 (montgomery)

Hanged Man arcana rank 7 -> 8 (niki)

Knowledge +6 (studying)

Star arcana rank 8 -> 9 (skeppy)

Knowledge +3 (studying)

The Festival Draws Near

Chapter Summary

after exams is prep for the school festival!

Chapter Notes

wassup IM FREE TILL JANUARY !!

god university/college life is way more tiring than everyone says it is. It's all fun and rainbows, they said. Junior college life is the hardest of your education years, they said

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

10/17 – SATURDAY – MORNING

What's the name of the phenomenon where you feel like the second hand has stopped? How long can long-term memory last? What does the word 'robota' mean in Czech?

"How was it?" George asks, poking at his back once the teacher has left the room with their scripts in hand.

"Not as dead as I thought I'd be." Thank goodness Clay decided to cram the psychology stuff last night.

"That's good."

"Yeah, tell me about it."

*

10/18 – SUNDAY – DAYTIME

"How the hell are you so good at this?" Nick cries, slamming the gun controller back into its holster. Clay laughs, voice muffled by the crowd in the arcade.

George grins. "Beginner's luck."

"More like *pro's* luck. I bet you play Gun About a lot when we're not looking."

"I don't even come to the arcade that often."

"Okay, George. It's my turn," Clay plucks the controller from the holster, still hot and sweaty from when Nick was using it.

"Ooh, I'm so scared."

"You'd better be."

While Clay utterly decimates George at the game, George didn't do too terribly overall, his points just several hundreds behind Clay's. Naturally, Tommy's score remains at the top of the ranking, still above Clay's by a few thousands.

"Okay, I give up. You've definitely spent a lot of time here," George says, placing the controller back into the holster.

Nick tsks. "That's why your grades are slipping."

"Excuse me," Clay huffs.

"Look at us out here playing at the arcade instead of studying."

"What's the point if we're going to fail anyway?" George says, shrugging.

Clay bristles. "Unlike you, I can't fail or I'm gonna get kicked out to juvenile hall."

The three of them leave the arcade, the sun high in the sky. It's almost coming to the end of autumn. Very soon, winter will be upon them with its biting cold and the softness of snow.

"You guys are finally done," Floris says, walking up to them. Clay scoops him up and Floris climbs into his bag.

"Yeah. We had a blast," Clay says. Floris scoffs.

"I want to go back to that darts and billiards place."

"Maybe sometime soon," Clay says. "I was feeling the arcade today."

"You should be feeling your textbooks."

"That just..." Nick stifles a laugh. "That sounds wrong on so many levels."

"Nick!" George cries, but he's biting on his lip.

"God, get your minds out of the gutter," Clay slaps Nick hard on the shoulder. It almost feels like they've been together for a long time, like old friends.

It had been a good time while it lasted, because now, honestly, Clay and Nick need to get back to hitting the books.

*

[10/19 – MONDAY – AFTERNOON](#)

Where did the phrase "cat got your tongue" originate? How many white and black pentagons are there on a soccer ball? "PVS" refers to a phenomenon where you believe your phone is going off but it actually isn't. What does it stand for?

"Are you alive?" Darryl asks, prodding at Clay's shoulder.

"No."

"Well then I guess we can just leave you here to wallow in your self-pity."

Clay raises his head. "You can be pretty mean if you want to be."

Darryl scoffs.

*

10/20 – TUESDAY – MORNING

Which of the following describes the density of the stars in outer space? What is the phenomenon called when you gain more muscle after being sore after exercise? Under what conditions will you build up lactic acid in your muscles?

“Is he okay?” Floris asks, tilting his head at Harvey who appears to have fainted on the table.

“I’m sure he is,” Nick says.

“Kill me now,” Harvey groans.

*

10/21 – WEDNESDAY – MORNING

“It’s finally over!” Clay cries, punching his fists in the air. He is about to pack up and leave but stops short of standing when he realizes that no one has left their seats, not even those students who bolt straight after examinations.

“Why’s everyone staying?” Clay whispers to George.

“Huh? We’re supposed to discuss the festival prep after exams, remember?”

When the fuck did that happen? Was that announcement buried under all those spam messages in the chatgroup again?

“So you’re telling me I can’t go home and chill even after the exams are over?” Clay hisses.

“Nope,” George says, popping the “P”. “Believe me, I want to leave as much as you do.”

The class representatives take the front of the class, shouting to maintain order.

“Alright, now we’re going to have to come up with ideas for our booth for the festival.” The class representative starts to speak and that is Clay’s clue to zone out.

It’s only when the class begins to roar – out of anger, frustration or excitement, Clay isn’t sure – that he jolts from his daydreams. On the whiteboard, there are four options written: a rest stop area, a movie showcase, a food stand and a...His eyes bulge.

“What is a group date café?” Floris asks.

“Fuck if I know,” Clay mutters. That option is so dumb. No one’s ever going to vote for that. Honestly, a rest stop doesn’t sound too bad. It’d be low effort and low budget, giving him more time to walk around the stalls with the rest of the gang.

The class reps hand out small pieces of paper that they’re supposed to write their votes on. Clay pens down the most logical choice and hands it back, choosing to go back to building sandcastles in the air.

“Right, so the winning option is...the group date café.”

Clay's gaze snaps to the board so fast his vision blurs. After tallying up the scores, it seems that the group date café has won so many votes that it puts the other options to shame.

"Who the hell voted for that?" Clay hisses.

"Beats me," George says, shrugging.

"No one's gonna come," Darryl says, leaning back against his seat. "So we'll need fewer people handling this than any of the other options. It'll give us more time to explore the festival."

That actually makes a whole lot of sense.

The class reps are already assigning roles – those who are manning the stall, those in charge of the logistics, finance and others.

It appears that Clay, George and Darryl coincidentally got the worst job of all – manning the stall. On Sunday, at least.

"Why." George's forehead hits the table. "They needed three people and all three happened to be us."

"I don't think it's a coincidence," Clay says, sighing. "Honestly, I think we're just being targeted."

"At least we're free on the second day," Darryl points out. "That's when the more interesting stuff is supposed to happen."

"Like what?" George asks.

"The, uh, Celebrity Talk and the Student Sharing Session. Oh, and the wrap-up party."

"Oh."

After the last few details are smoothed out, the class leaves in a hurry. Clay can hardly blame them. He doesn't want to remain here longer than necessary either. It's time to head back home to his nice little bed and to sleep everything off...

*

10/21 – WEDNESDAY – EVENING

Eret: Hi I'd like to see all of u tomorrow

Eret: at the student council room after school

Me: why

Zak: I can't get in

Eret: I'd like to see all of u minus zak

Eret: it's regarding the school festival and what it can mean for the future of the thieves

Zak: what the fuck is that supposed to mean

Me: I can video call you if you want, zak

Zak: gr8 thanks

Eret: you guys will be joining the festival executive committee

Eret: it's for the future of the thieves

Eret: just keep telling yourself that and it won't seem like a chore

Me: what the actual fuck

Zak: Darryl says language

Me: Is he busy

Zak: no but he's too lazy to reach for his phone

Me: lmao

Eret: So tomorrow

Eret: Student Council Room

Eret: after school

Me: sure

Nick: yep

Clay places his phone back onto the shelf as he boots up Mimecraft. Phoenix SC hasn't been on in weeks, though he did say that he'd be settling legal affairs until mid-November. As expected, he isn't there today, but now Clay has both Tubbo and Tommy to play with.

Though, to be honest, they're quite a handful.

*

10/22 – THURSDAY – DAYTIME

“What's up?” George asks, raising a hand in greeting. He's the fourth one to arrive, having come after Clay, Eret and Floris.

“Nothing,” Floris says. “We're just sitting here staring at each other.”

“Oh. Let me join in on the staring, then.” George settles down beside Clay. Perhaps it must have been the period of rest after the storm of horror back on October the twelfth, but those butterflies that invade Clay's stomach whenever he sees George has somehow...returned. Resurfaced.

God, and he thought he chased the feelings away already.

George, on the other hand, hums a tune as he scrolls through messages on his phone, blissfully unaware of Clay's inner turmoil. Clay rests his forehead against George's arm and George jerks.

“Get off me.”

“I look so sad and that's your first response?”

“What are you even sad about? Exams are over,” George says. He doesn't shrug Clay off, only returns to scrolling through social media.

Eret visibly shifts and turns in his seat, moving his laptop onto his lap. Floris leaps onto the desk and joins him.

“I’m not sad. I just said I *looked* sad,” Clay mumbles. George smells faintly of lemongrass.

George hums. “If you’re thinking about the whole, uh, incident that day-“

George is interrupted by Darryl who barges into the room, face red, perspiration mumbling harried apologies.

Clay springs away, as if burned by fire. Floris snickers.

Presumably too weary to read the room, Darryl moves over and settles down next to George, and that is that.

Not long after, Nick shows up with Harvey, the two having a nice chat as they stroll in fashionably late. Eret starts up the video call with Zak over Zoom, the latter’s face appearing on the screen looking rather bored at home with his legs kicked up on the desk.

[“What’s](#) so important that you can’t tell us over text?” Clay asks when everyone has finally settled down.

“So, here’s the thing,” Eret says. “Usually the Student Council is in charge of the Celebrity Talk, correct?”

“Yeah?” Harvey starts, but snaps his jaw shut when Eret bends down and heaves a heavy-looking white box onto the desk.

“We’ve put up the nomination forms a while ago, and the voting took place while we were still busy with the Palace stuff,” Eret says. “So if you remember this...”

“No, I don’t think I voted,” Clay says, shaking his head. “Where’d you even put that up?”

“In the cafeteria.” Eret opens the lid of the box, revealing a ton of small slips of paper which probably number in the thousands.

“No, I’m totally not doing this,” Harvey looks devastated.

“Thank God I’m not there right now,” Zak says with a relieved sigh.

“I would need you guys to help me count these.”

“What!” Floris stares at the sea of paper slips in the box.

“What the actual...” Nick starts, stopping when Darryl shoots him a look. “Is *this* the important thing that you called us here for? Why not just ask your Student Council underlings?”

“Well, for one, they’re not my *underlings*.”

“We’re not your underlings either,” Floris says.

Eret ignores that. “I took a look at some of the votes, and believe me, you’d want to see this.”

With a little grumbling from Nick and Harvey, the bunch of them get around to counting the numerous slips of paper. *Blade...Blade...another Blade...* what the hell? When Clay gets to the end of his assigned pile, he’d estimate that about ninety per cent of the names he’s read was: Blade.

“Is it just me or did most people vote for Blade?” Darryl asks.

“It’s not just you,” George says, crumpling another strip of paper, probably with Blade’s name on it.

“Why do you think I’m done so fast?” Nick mutters.

“Is this what you wanted to show us?” Clay asks.

“Pretty much,” Eret says. “So it’s safe to say that-“

“Blade won by a landslide,” Floris finishes. “Since the Phantom Thieves are now branded as criminals, people are turning on us, and they go back to supporting the person who’s been against us from the very start.”

“So now Blade’s being celebrated,” Zak says. “Like a real celebrity.”

“He’s always been a celebrity, just that he doesn’t like it,” Clay mumbles.

“I don’t think that this is all bad,” Darryl says.

“I have to agree,” Eret says. “Blade is part of the police, correct?”

“We can make use of this opportunity to get some info out of him.” Realization dawns on Clay’s face as he straightens his shoulders.

“But who’s asking the questions?” Nick asks.

“Probably me,” Eret says. “We should ask about their investigation out of him, see how much the police knows about the principal and Lee’s murders.”

Harvey stiffens at that.

“So it’s settled then? We’re going to invite this guy?” George asks.

“I’ll contact him,” Eret says, phone already in hand. “We don’t know whether he’s going to accept, but it’s worth a try. I’ll let you guys know if he replies.”

They leave the room that day just as the sun is about to set. Eret heads down to the general office to return the key as the rest of the Thieves head out into the lonely streets of Enderlands.

*

[10/22 – THURSDAY – EVENING](#)

“Eh?”

“Hmm?”

Clay looks up, only to find Blade staring at him, both reaching for the final bottle of Mountain Dew on the shelf.

“What are *you* doing here?”

“The store near my house ran out,” Blade says, shrugging.

“Dude. This is like, three train stops away from where you live.”

“And how do you know where I live?”

“In Beatty?”

Blade laughs. “Sorry, but no. The address of my humble abode remains a mystery.” He snatches the bottle and places it into his shopping basket.

“If not for the fact that my friend and his dad is watching a horror movie I’d be at home now,” Clay mumbles.

Blade gives him a funny look. “That didn’t make sense at all.”

“What? Why?”

“You live with your friend and his dad?”

“Oh, uh...” Clay scratches his head. “It’s complicated.

Blade's lips twist into a grin. "Try me."

*

“That’s a shame.”

“No ‘I’m sorry’” or anything like that? Man, you’re kinda mean.”

Blade scoffs. “Sometimes, bad things happen to people. You just gotta take it in stride and see what you can make out of it.”

“Really? You’re giving me life advice now?” Clay pouts, eyes following a woman holding her child’s hand as they stride past them. He blindly reaches for the bottle of Mountain Dew that they’ve agreed to share.

Clay hasn’t noticed till now, but Valentine Hills now sports a sinister yet childish atmosphere. Halloween decorations have been put up in most of the stores, ranging from cardboard ghosts to streamers shaped like bats and flyers advertising for haunted houses.

“It’s always time for life advice,” Blade says, chuckling, holding the bottle out of Clay’s reach. Silence reigns for a moment, before Blade says, “Your school’s hosting a festival?”

“Yeah,” Clay says. “How’d you...oh.”

“Your Student Council President contacted me,” Blade says. “Said I’m to be most welcome at your Celebrity Talk.” He laughs. “I don’t usually like to draw attention to myself, but I think I’ll go for this one.”

“Wait, why?”

“I have my reasons,” Blade says, shrugging.

“Give that here,” Clay huffs, making a grab for the bottle, only to find that it is totally empty. “You drank the whole thing!”

“I paid for it, last I checked.”

“Okay, fair point,” Clay says. He shivers as a cold draft whips around them. The sun has already

set beneath the horizon and the stars have come out, blinking in the sky. Sort of reminds him of the view in Lee's Palace.

Clay checks his phone. It's almost nine. If Mrs Armstrong was home, she'd have his head on the platter when he gets back.

"I'll be seeing you in three days, then," Clay says. "Don't miss me."

"Oh, I won't. You don't have to worry about that."

Clay heads off towards the train station, a tiny leaf landing on his nose. He blows it out of his face, hands stuffed into his pockets.

He only hopes that the horror movie's over by the time he gets back.

*

10/24 – SATURDAY – DAYTIME

The group date café's looking...somewhat...it's... Clay tilts his head, arms folded. He has no words.

"It looks really cheery," Floris says.

"As it should be," Darryl says.

"I think we put too much effort into something that's going to flop super badly," George says.

"Oh well. If it flops, then that just means less work for us," Clay says, leaning against the wall.

"Man, I can't believe I sacrificed my afternoon for this." Not to mention that he's meeting Dr Montgomery later for dinner at a special place she's managed to book.

His phone buzzes and he glances down at the screen. A message from Eret, it seems.

Blade has accepted their invitation, apparently, so he would be coming onto the Celebrity Talk event on the twenty-sixth.

"I wonder what Eret's going to ask," George says, slipping his phone back into his pocket.

While that may be an issue that they will need to smooth out, Clay is more concerned about what Blade said during their conversation last night. About him having his reasons to attend. Surely it can't be as shallow as, say, getting more clout, can it? He's already one of the most well-known people around these parts.

"We'll settle that tonight. Chances are, he won't need our help," Clay says.

"Yeah. Worst come to worst, we can just hang out at the café and discuss our plans," Darryl says. Well, it looks like he's already certain that they're going to get a grand total of zero customers, which, to be honest, isn't that hard to believe.

Clay hurries off first towards the counselling room, waving goodbye to Darryl and George as he thunders down the stairs.

*

10/24 – SATURDAY – EVENING

“Thank you for joining me for this, Clay.”

“No, I have to thank you,” Clay says, shaking his head. It’s true. Dr Montgomery has offered to pay for this expensive buffet, goddamn it. It’s the same one that the Thieves had eaten at during their first celebration.

“Well, you’re probably wondering what this celebration is for,” Dr Montgomery says with a smile.

“Kind of.”

“After months of hard work and research, I’ve almost managed to finish my research paper. There’s just a couple of kinks I need smoothed out,” Dr Montgomery says proudly, unable to stop the grin from spreading across her face.

“Really? Congratulations!” Clay’s eyes widen in genuine surprise.

“And I couldn’t have done it without your help,” Dr Montgomery says, positively glowing. “For opening my mind to the collective subconscious, and how that could be used to treat people with unspeakable, misunderstood traumas of the heart.”

“I...It’s no problem.” Right, it *had* been him who’d given her the ideas, inspired by the whole Metaverse thing.

“Do eat up,” Dr Montgomery says, gesturing to the spread before them. “It’s the least I can do to thank you.”

Clay does chow down, offering Floris a piece of meat or two.

“Before we get *too* into it,” Dr Montgomery says with a slight chuckle, “I would like to ask you about-“

“Tammy?”

Clay looks up at the foreign voice. Dr Montgomery raises her head, her eyes going wide like saucers.

“Hans! How are you?”

A lanky young man walks up to them, especially well-dressed in a blue suit with a complementing red tie. He glances from Dr Montgomery to Clay.

“This is Clay, a student at the school I do counselling for,” Dr Montgomery says.

Hans nods in Clay’s direction, and Clay remains dutifully silent, ears perked as he listens to their conversation.

“You quit being a researcher?”

“Not quite,” Dr Montgomery says. “I’m still doing research. For Patricia’s sake.”

Patricia?

“Patricia...how’s she doing, by the way?” Hans asks, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

“She’s doing pretty well now, actually. She’s really happy,” Dr Montgomery says, waving a hand.

“Really?” Hans starts, scratching his head. “I...um...I didn’t know that. But congratulations!”

“Thank you, but I don’t hang out with her much anymore,” Dr Montgomery smiles, a tinge of regret in her voice. “It’s fine, though. As long as she’s achieved happiness.”

Hans looks a little put off by that. “I guess so. Well, if you’d like, I can review your paper for you.”

“Really?” Clay has never seen Dr Montgomery look this thrilled. “That would be awesome. Thank you!”

“It’s no problem,” Hans says. “I suppose I’ll be seeing you soon then.”

With that, he leaves them to their meal.

“Who was that?” Clay asks as soon as he’s out of earshot.

“My former colleague,” Dr Montgomery says. “He also researches cognitive science and has published a few papers if you’re interested.”

Clay shakes his head vigorously, eliciting a chuckle from Dr Montgomery.

“I think that’s enough talk about that for now. Perhaps I’ll consult you about my paper the next time we meet,” Dr Montgomery says.

That night, Clay leaves the buffet with a bursting stomach and a promise to visit Dr Montgomery soon to finish up the last of her paper. Although, tomorrow’s the festival, so that may have to be put on hold for a while longer...

*

Chapter End Notes

knowledge +3 (studying)

Priestess arcana rank 8 -> 9 (technoblade)

Councillor arcana rank 7 -> 8 (montgomery)

Oh, How The Tables Have Turned...

Chapter Summary

school festival - techno-centric ?

also omitted the sumi-dance scene in royal...too hard to translate into words...

Chapter Notes

HELLO EVERYONE i have a little surprise for you! it's called a cryptogram! (Note: i did not keyboard smash for a scene that you will see later)

As Dream tells Mrs Armstrong about what happened during this arc, he's forgotten quite a couple of things, a couple of holes in his memories, if you will. These scenes are represented in the form of cryptograms, where each alphabet is replaced by another. Decipher it correctly and you can make out what they are saying! Of course, that would mean you will also figure out the identity of the Black Mask before the grand reveal...

also im not sure if anyone realized it but i totally skipped a day last chapter. i literally jumped from 10/22 to 10/24 and all the days were messed up like tuesday came after wednesday omg i didn't even notice until this morning

i guess u can treat that missing day as Dream just helping out with the festival prep...

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

10/25 – SUNDAY – DAYTIME

As expected, no one came to their group date café. It doesn't help that their classroom is located at the very end of the hallway of the second floor, which is pretty deserted even on normal school days.

Clay literally spends the entire time playing games on his phone and scrolling through social media, periodically plugging his phone in to the wall socket to charge. Darryl and George are as bored as he is, slumped over a table in the middle of the room. Floris is sitting on one of the tables, staring out the window.

“What are you guys doing?”

Nick strolls in, with Harvey, Zak and Eret in tow.

“Being bored,” Clay says, abandoning his phone by the wall and migrating to the central table where Darryl and George are seated.

“I can see that,” Eret says.

[“But](#) it’s quiet enough that we can discuss Phantom Thief stuff,” Floris says, hopping over. “Eret, about those questions...”

“I’ve listened to your suggestions, and this is the final list,” Eret says, pulling out his phone and opening the Google document. He slides it towards the centre of the table, the Phantom Thieves lean in, poring over the list of questions pertaining to finding out what Blade knows about the investigation, as well as who he thinks the Phantom Thieves are.

In front of an audience of so many people, Blade can’t afford not to answer.

“Of course, these questions are subject to change, depending on his replies,” Eret says. “So I don’t think I’ll be following this script to a T.”

“I think it’s fine,” Clay says. “When’s the talk tomorrow?”

“Around...ten in the morning. Slightly before lunch,” Eret says. “I trust that you’ll all be there?”

“Yeah, and we can take a longer walk around the festival tomorrow,” Nick says. “It sucks that the three of you are stuck here today.”

Clay sighs.

“Right then,” Eret says. “I’ve got some stuff to attend to, so just...uh...enjoy the rest of today?”

Everyone besides the four of them take their leave. Clay drops his head back onto the table and mentally prepares himself for another two hours of boredom...Tomorrow will be the day that they will carry out the first step of their plan of action to, once more, bring glory to the Phantom Thieves' name.

*

[10/26 – MONDAY – MORNING](#)

The gymnasium is noisy, so full of excited chatter that it grates Clay’s ears. He and the other Thieves, Eret notwithstanding, are standing on the second floor, watching more and more students file in.

“It’s starting,” Floris hisses as the lights begin to dim and the spotlights cast a blinding glow on the podium on the stage. The cacophony ceases as the students sit in rapt attention.

Eret strides up to the middle of the stage from behind the thick curtain, a piece of paper in one hand and a microphone in the other.

“Testing, one, two three,” Eret mumbles into the microphone. Clay can hear him loud and clear. Satisfied, Eret proceeds to introduce the event; he informs the student body of the rules, what they can ask and what they can’t say, as well as other miscellaneous details.

“And so, the guest that has received ninety per cent of the votes,” Eret says, “is Mr Blade, known as the second coming of the Detective Prince. He’s on the tail of the Phantom Thieves, one of the lead investigators of the case. Let us put our hands together to welcome Mr Blade on Celebrity Talk!”

The audience claps and whoops. Another man strides out from behind the other side of the curtain, dressed as he would on television shows as he takes the podium.

“Mr Blade, how are you on this fine day?” Eret asks.

“Feeling pretty great, actually,” Blade says with a pleasant smile. “The weather’s nice, we’re getting close to finding out the identity of the Phantom Thieves, too.”

Getting pretty close? What’s that supposed to mean? Clay can’t hear himself over the cheers of the crowd below.

“What? That’s not possible,” Zak whispers, narrowing his eyes.

“Getting pretty close? Do you have hard evidence to prove your deductions?” Eret asks.

“Something like that,” Blade says, shrugging.

There’s no way. He’s just bluffing right now. Blade has nothing. Clay did not give him any sort of information that would lead him right to them.

“I have my own opinion,” Blade says, his deep baritone silencing the agitated chatter of the crowd. “I have my own opinion as to who the Thieves are.”

“Really?” Eret raises a brow. “Would you say that they are behind Mr Andre Lee’s mental shutdown, Mr Blade?”

Blade thumbs at his chin. “If they are who I think they are, then no. I cannot imagine that they would do such a thing. The culprit behind the mental shutdowns must be someone else.”

The students gasp. Clay blinks. What is that supposed to mean?

“If they are who you think they are? Would you like to tell us your opinion, Mr Blade?” Eret asks. His shoulders are tensed, no longer a picture of the calm and collected President that Clay is used to seeing.

“Then everyone here will hear it first,” Blade says, chuckling. “Of course, I don’t mind, but…”

His phone rings just then, classical music blasting from his pocket.

“There goes my phone,” Blade says in the most monotone voice possible. “Sorry, I think I’ll have to take this one. Do you have a spare room that I can use?”

“Of course,” Eret says tightly. “Will ten minutes be enough for you?”

“Sure,” Blade says, and hands the microphone back to Eret. He ducks his head, lips right by Eret’s ear, whispering something. When he’s done, all Clay can see is Eret’s wide eyes, expression a blend of shock and horror. Composing himself almost instantly, Eret walks back up to the stage and addresses the crowd, informing them to sit tight, because Blade would be back in a matter of minutes.

Clay is left befuddled. There is only one thing that Blade could possibly have said to him, that would instil such surprise in Eret of all people. Blade leaves the gymnasium, much to the disappointment of the audience.

Eret meets Clay’s eyes, flicking to the door.

“Let’s go,” Clay says, swallowing the lump in his throat. “Let’s go and talk to Blade.”

“Talk to Blade? What do you mean?” Harvey asks.

Clay doesn't respond. Instead, he leads the Thieves out of the gymnasium, making their way down to the first floor. Eret meets them at the entrance with Blade.

"Let's go somewhere private," Blade says.

"The club room over there will do," Eret says, gesturing towards an empty room all the way at the end of a corridor, completely deserted since most of the booths are either in the main school building or in the classroom block.

"Perfect," Blade says, glancing around. "Everyone's here."

"Everyone?" Nick sounds confused. Clay will explain later. The group follows Blade and Eret into the clubroom, unease and tensions mounting.

*

["Okay, so](#) all eight of you are here. Good. That's very good," Blade says, hands in his pockets.

"How?" Clay asks, taking a step forward. "How did you know?"

Blade smirks and fishes a couple of pieces of paper from his pocket, glossy and laminated, and hands them to Clay. Clay nearly drops them when he realizes just what it depicts.

Right there, appearing from thin air, with half their bodies vanished, are Eret and Darryl. The next picture shows Floris, Nick and George, and the final one Clay, Harvey and Zak.

Zak snatches the photographs out of Clay's hands. "Dude! What the fuck?"

"Language!" Darryl's voice is clipped.

"*You tell me*," Blade says, shrugging. "I was sucked into a completely foreign *space station* of all things and found out that you guys' clothes just changed while we were in there. What was I supposed to think?"

"But still, you..."

"I staked out that area, of course," Blade says. "Then when you guys came running out of nowhere, I had to take some evidence."

"Then why haven't you reported us?" Clay asks. "You have photo evidence. You could literally arrest us right now and..." He trails off, the implication clear. Blade raises his hands in defence.

"I haven't reported you because I don't think you're the ones behind the mental shutdowns," Blade says.

"Why?"

"Because I..." Blade closes his mouth, looking away. "You're not the kind of people that would do such a thing. There's no hard evidence, but that's what my intuition is telling me, alright?"

"Okay, but that aside, the police are looking for the Phantom Thieves," Harvey says. "There's even a bounty on Clay's head right now."

"There's a bounty on my head?"

"Yeah," Darryl says. "It was announced this morning in the news. A million dollars for whoever

can locate the leader of the Phantom Thieves.”

“Holy shit,” Clay mutters.

“So why haven’t you turned him in?” Harvey asks. “You could get a million dollars.”

“I have to admit that while money is tempting,” Blade says with a chuckle that rings hollow, “I need your help.”

“Our help?” Nick looks affronted.

“Yes,” Blade says. “If you refuse, I’m going to the police with the evidence.”

“What do you want?” Clay asks quickly. He doesn’t mind turning himself in if it means the guaranteed safety of his team, but he’s *not* okay with jeopardizing the futures of the others. If Blade has a proposal...

“You see, the person who’s going to ruin you guys is none other than” – Blade turns to meet Nick’s gaze – “this guy’s mother.”

“What do you mean my mother?” Nick asks.

“You see, she’s the lead investigator, right? So the thing is she has just been offered a promotion by the SIU, and with all the pressure...” He pauses, watching their expressions carefully. “With all the pressure, she’s desperate. And desperate people...well, they aren’t above forging evidence.”

Nick acts before Clay even realizes what’s happening. Nick grabs Blade by the collar, fabric bunched between his fingers, lifting him effortlessly into the air. Blade doesn’t flinch, meeting Nick’s gaze with the same intensity even as he is shoved roughly against the wall.

“You take that back right now,” Nick growls, not letting go even with Eret and Harvey attempting to pull him back. “You fucking take that back right now or–”

“What I’m saying is the truth,” Blade says as a matter-of-factly. “Whether you accept it or not is your choice.”

Nick gnashes his teeth, but there’s nothing he can do. He unclenches his fist and Blade’s feet touches the floor. Clay admires his tenacity, his ability to just...take it.

“I heard it from her own mouth. She’s going to get that promotion by hook or by crook,” Blade says. “Sounds familiar?”

“Sounds like a twisted desire,” Floris says.

“Yes,” Blade says, nodding. “Sounds similar to Krones, and Marion, and Kris, and even Lee.”

“All our previous targets...”

“Minus Medjed, of course,” Blade says. “Look, what I’m saying is–”

“Is that you want us to change her heart, right?” George finishes.

“Exactly. Oh, and on top of that, you have to disband the Phantom Thieves.”

“Disband the Phantom Thieves?” Clay looks back at Blade.

“That’s what I said.” He shuffles on the spot. “You don’t have to tell me now, but I assure you that she’s gonna conduct a full-scale investigation on the twentieth of November.”

“Then if we want to steal her heart, we’re going to have to send the calling card by the nineteenth at the latest,” Floris says.

“Wait, what the hell? You’re actually considering it?” Nick glares at Floris.

“Look, let’s discuss this when we’re done with the festival, alright?” Clay says, holding up his hands. “Everyone will go back and think about it and we’ll meet up tomorrow, got that?”

“Tomorrow? I’m fine with that,” George says.

“Okay then,” Blade says. “I think I’ll take my leave now.” He turns to Eret. “Do you mind settling the crowd for me?”

“I’ll...I’ll do my best,” Eret says. Blade exits the room first, not looking at all affected by that whole conversation. Blade has the upper hand here, Clay realizes. He has all the cards in his hand, playing them like a fiddle, getting them exactly where he wants them to be.

God.

[“Hey.”](#) Floris whispers as the other Thieves file out of the room.

“What is it?” Clay asks.

“Hrl agrn, k'sp ippg jmkgakgy,” Floris says. Clay shifts his weight from one foot to the other. “Dirlj...xrupjmkgy xjzdgyp.”

“Xrupjmkgy xjzdgyp?”

“Hrl zpupui pz jmdj edh dj jmp fdza oqpdglf? Nmpg np wkz xj upj yprzyp?”

“Hpdm?” Clay narrows his eyes. What is Floris talking about?

“Zpupui pz nmpg I jr qe hrl mp ndx orqrlziqkge?”

“Hpx?” A sinking feeling plagues Clay’s stomach.

“Mp zpxfrgepe, ekeg’j mp? Mp zpxfrgepe”

“Mp...?” Clay shakes his head. “K erg’j zpupui pz. Ilj pspg kw mp eke, nmdj...” His eyes go wide. “Gr...”

“Mp eke. K’u xlzp rw kj. Rgqh fprfqp nmr’sp yrgp kgjr jmp upjdspzxp ipwrzp odg mpdz up,” Floris says stubbornly. “Urzprspz, mp agpn xrupjmkgy mp ekeg’j jrr, idoa nmpg mp ‘dndapgpe’ mkx fpzxr gd kg ykgd’x fdqdop. mp odqqpe hrl ih hrlz orepgdup pspg jmrlym hrl ekeg’j jpqq mku lgjkq np ipydg jmp kgwkqjzdkrg.”

“Nmdj er hrl updg, wqrz kx? Nmdj dzp hrl xdhkgy?” Clay’s breathing quickens, his heart pounding. Floris can’t possibly mean what he thinks he means.

“K’u xdhkgy jmdj yprzyp orlqe spzh npqq ip jmp iqdoa udx a,” Floris says. “Kw jmdj’x xr, jmpg pspzhjmkgy udapx xpgxp. Pspzh xkgyqp jmkgy. Pspg mrn ykgd wr lge lx.”

“Mrn ykgd wr lge lx?”

“Jmkga dirlj kj. Xmp ulxj mdsp wrlge rlj dirlj lx lxkgy mpz jpomgrqrykodq agrn-mrn orgxkepzkgymrn xmp gpspz qpdspz mpz zrru ipwrzp brkgkgy lx. K’e xdh xruprgp’x fmrgrp ndx ilyype, oqdh.”

“Ilyype? Ilj hrl xdke jmdj xmp gpspz qpdspz...” Realization dawns on Clay. He can hardly move, frozen to the spot. The evidence is staring at him right in the face, but he just...he *refuses* to believe it. There’s no way that *he* can be the Black Mask. *No fucking way.*

“Oqdh, k agrn-“

Clay grunts.

“Np xmrlqe appf rlz yldze lf dzrlge mku,” Floris says. “K erg’j agrn nmdj mp’x fqdggkgy, dxxrokdjkgym nkjm lx qkap jmdj.”

Clay drops his gaze. That information hit hard. Even now, he doesn’t want to believe it. Doesn’t want to believe that one of his friends is...

“Hey! Are you coming?” Nick calls from outside.

“Y-Yeah!” Clay shouts back. Floris leaps into his bag and hurries after him. With that giant revelation, that truth staring at him right in the face, socking him in the gut, he isn’t sure he can truly enjoy the festival now...

*

[10/26 – MONDAY – EVENING](#)

“Bye! We gotta get going now,” Darryl calls as he and Zak head toward the station. Harvey is needed for some company matter at home and has left long ago. It’s Nick’s turn to do the grocery run, and Floris decides to accompany him, in case he decides to do something stupid.

“Are you in a hurry to head home?” Eret asks.

“Not particularly,” Clay and George respond in unison.

“Well, the Student Sharing Session and the wrap-up party is happening soon at the gym,” Eret says. “I’m going to need to attend to some matters there so I’ll get going first, but it’ll be great if you could come.”

“Are you hosting it?” George asks.

“No, but I’m in charge of it,” Eret says, sighing. He gives them a quick wave and jogs off down the hallway.

Clay glances over at George. They’re truly alone this time, without any of the other Thieves around. “You, uh...you wanna head on over to that weird Sharing Session?”

“Why not? We’ve nothing to do anyway, and I want to get my mind off things,” George says.

They don’t talk the whole way there, the only sounds being conversations between other students and the sound of their footsteps against the hollow concrete floor. Soon, the gymnasium comes into view. Clay pushes open the double doors, revealing a gathering of students already seated. The crowd isn’t as big as that of the Celebrity Talk, but it’s still a sizeable one.

George finds a pair of seats near the front of the stage, since all the good seats have already been taken, with Clay settling next to him.

“What do you think’s going to happen? We don’t have such things back at my old school.”

“Neither did I,” Clay says, leaning back against the chair which creaks under his weight. “I think it’s an Enderlands thing.”

“I’m actually a little excited for this.”

“Really?”

“Aren’t y-oh, it’s starting!” The lights dim, just like they had during the Celebrity Talk. A student walks up on stage and announces that they’d be starting the event.

“Did everyone have a great time?”

A series of cheers and shrieks from the audience serves as a reply.

“Amazing!” the host claps his hands. “It’s been a wild ride this whole year, huh? Anyone wanna come out and start sharing about what they think about it?” The host scans the audience, gaze landing on Clay.

“How about that pretty young man over there?”

Clay points at himself, but the host shakes his head, gesturing to George. Well, ouch. Then again, the host’s not wrong.

“What? Me?” George glances around, and Clay jerks his chin at the stage.

“Yup, you.”

George rises ever so hesitantly and heads up to the stage, handed a second microphone by another student.

“What’s your name and what class are you from?” the host asks with a giant smile.

“Um, I’m George and I’m from Class 2-E...”

“Give it up for George!” the host practically screams into his microphone and the gymnasium bursts into a round of applause. George stands up straighter, grasping the microphone even more firmly in his hand.

“So, George, is there anything you’d like to share with us? About recent happenings? The Phantom Thieves?”

“I...uh...” George fumbles for his words. Adorably, Clay should add. “I think the Phantom Thieves have done quite a bit of good for us. Especially with Krones, from what I hear.”

“From what you hear?”

“I transferred in around June, so I wouldn’t know,” George says, shrugging.

“Speaking of transferring in around June, there were rumours that it’s because of an incident with your family,” the host says, wagging his brows. “Would you like to elaborate for us, George?”

George visibly flinches. Clay stiffens. His family situation is a touchy topic for him. Was this the host’s plan the whole time?

“The audience is waiting, George.”

“Well...”

Clay’s got to do something and at this point in time, he acts before he thinks...

“George!” Clay screams at the top of his lungs, not even caring about the curious and disgusted looks shot his way. “Please go out with me!”

What the fuck did he just say?

George stares, wide-eyed, at him, jaw dropped. The host recovers quickly from Clay’s unexpected outburst. Clay gulps. What did he just do?

“Whoa, whoa, *whoa*! What do we have here?” the host cries, stunned expression now morphed into one of glee. “A sudden, heartfelt confession? George! You have a knight in shining armour standing there, waiting for your response!”

Clay’s eyes dart towards the door, then back to George, hoping George understands him, even without their telepathy in the Metaverse. Thankfully, George does, because he speaks into the microphone.

“Sorry, I’ve got to go. My knight is waiting for me,” George says lowly, shoving the microphone back against the host’s chest. He leaps off the stage, runs over to Clay, grabs his wrist and drags the both of them out of the gymnasium, much to the cheers of the catcalls and thunderous claps of the audience.

George doesn’t stop running, not until they’ve climbed three flights of stairs and reached the roof of the building. The whole time, George’s back is to Clay, and Clay can hardly blame him.

[The night](#) is cold, Clay feeling utterly underdressed without his blazer yet his face burns warmly as George lets go of him, staring at the fantastic view of the city before them. The sun’s setting beneath the skyline, the last of its golden rays peeking out from behind skyscrapers.

“That was a joke, right?” George asks, still out of breath. His fists are clenched. Clay’s chest constricts.

“That wasn’t...” Clay stuffs his hands into his pockets.

“You just confessed to me in front of...probably three hundred people.”

“You were in trouble,” Clay says. “I had to get you out of there.”

“That’s not all there is, is there?” George says, spinning on the balls of his feet to face Clay, expression unreadable. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed.”

“Noticed what?”

“All that...all that you’ve been doing. Your, um...” George glances away at the sound of booming cheers from downstairs. “You just...” He sighs in frustration.

It’s now or never. The heavens has giving him this opportunity, this single chance to clarify. All the while, he thought he could be rid of them, be able to cast them away like driftwood into the sea. Yet, the beacon of light that is George will always stir up a blanket of unexplainable emotions within his chest, wrapping around him like a warm quilt in the dead of winter.

“George,” Clay says, swallowing thickly. He can hardly hear himself speak, the roar of blood rushing through his ears much too loud. “George, I...”

“Answer me, Clay!”

“I like you!”

Silence.

There. He’s said it.

He’s got it off his chest.

The longing, the lingering wisps of emotion coiled tightly like chains that could have snapped at any moment...snapped.

George stares at him, as if trying to process the information. “Clay...I...I don’t think I’m someone you should...you should like in that way...”

“If you don’t like me in the same way, that’s fine too-“

“No, it’s not that.” George buries his face in his hands. “It’s...um...” His Adam’s apple bobs, next words come out wavering. “I’m broken, Clay. I’m...I’m fucking broken, and you deserve so much better...”

“George. Listen to me.” Clay strides up to him, placing both hands on his shoulders. “You’re not broken. You’re just healing. You’ve went through a lot of shit in your life and you’re only seventeen. You...You shouldn’t be so hard on yourself.”

“But Clay...” George’s voice cracks, and that is all Clay needs to wrap his arms around George and draw him close. Their height difference makes it all the easier to tuck George’s head against the crook of his neck. Trembling fingers curl loosely into Clay’s uniform as he shakes, unmistakable sobs tearing from his throat. It’s as if someone ripped Clay’s heart from his ribcage, hurled it to the ground and stomped all over it, grinding with their heel to boot.

George calms down after a while, chest convulsing less, body relaxing against Clay’s.

“How’re you feeling?”

“I’m okay.” George’s voice is quiet, coarse. He snuffles. “Thanks.”

“I’m glad you’re fine,” Clay says, keeping his arms tight around George. They fit together so well, like two pieces of a puzzle. He doesn’t want to let go. Not now, not ever.

“As for your...um...confession,” George mumbles, suddenly shy. “I...I like you too.”

Clay’s heart almost stops. Did he just...? Did he hear it correctly? Did George just...?

“Oh my God,” Clay gives George some breathing room. He stares down at George’s face so intently, as if he’s memorising every single feature, every shadow, every contour. His lips look so delectable right now, as does the rest of him. “You’re not joking, right?”

“Why would I?” George laughs.

“Can I...” Clay stumbles over his words, cursing internally. “Can I kiss you?”

It's George who initiates the kiss, pulling on Clay's collar and dragging his face down, smashing their lips together. Their teeth bump painfully and Clay pulls away for a second, a thin string of saliva connecting their mouths, before swooping in once more, this time a firm press of his mouth against George's.

The kiss could have lasted five seconds, five minute, five months, five years or an eternity, but Clay wishes it would have lasted longer when George pulls away, a hand on Clay's chest and the other on his shoulder.

"I have never..." George's finger traces his lip. "I've never kissed anyone before."

"Did I just...steal your first kiss?" Clay can hardly keep the jubilation out of his tone. "Did I just steal your first kiss, George?"

"You stole more than my first kiss," George says with a sly smile. "You stole my heart, you Thief."

"You did *not* just say that." Clay would have dug a hole right there and then, buried himself in and never came out. "You didn't just...oh my God, *George!*"

"What? Is this how you treat your boyfriend, Clay?"

The duo basks in each other's presences as they in the middle of the rooftop all alone, surrounded by naught but the waning streams of sunlight, accompanied by the constellations of the stars in the sky above, breaths warm against the chill of autumn.

In this one moment, no one exists but themselves.

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Chapter End Notes

dear readers, if you did not read the beginning chapter notes, I DID NOT KEYBOARD SMASH! The scene that makes absolutely no sense are cryptograms! Each alphabet is replaced by another, and if you can decipher it correctly, then you can make out what they are saying!

Of course that would mean that you will also know the identity of the Black Mask if you choose to decipher it...

The cipher will be revealed in my author's notes on 11/20...

Magician arcana rank 7 -> 8 (george)

Techno

Chapter Summary

from the chapter title -> awakening chap lol

Chapter Notes

ngl i was NOT expecting so many people to be so on board with the whole cryptogram thing (i thought it would be a chore lol)...well, maybe because im super biased against cryptograms i mean i can't do them for my life so.....

kudos to those who did! there's another one here with the same cipher. for friends who want to solve it yet cannot, maybe can make use of this one as another encoded text to try to solve it? for friends who solved it, just take it as another scene that dream cannot remember exactly at this point in time. for friends who can't be bothered (which would have been me if im a reader), you're gonna have to wait till the chap of in-fic 11/20! to clarify, the cipher will be revealed in the end chapter notes only during the chap that the traitor's identity is revealed because im going to split 11/20 into several chapters...

cryptogram is not the only surprise i have waiting...the chapter on 11/20 has another one...

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

10/27 – TUESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“Okay,” Clay says, clapping his hands. “Is everyone here?”

“Zak’s on his way,” Darryl says.

Gina still doesn’t join them today, still holed up in her room researching something, apparently. Zak arrives a couple of minutes later, and the meeting officially begins.

“For starters, I’d like to hear your thoughts on this. Whether we should steal Nick’s mom’s heart,” Clay says.

“You mean,” Floris says, “whether we should go along with Blade’s plan.”

Well, Clay didn’t want to phrase it like that. Going along with Blade’s plan would result in their disbandment, and Clay isn’t sure whether he wants to stop his activities as the Phantom Thieves already. Not when they’re just getting into the groove, but with everything that’s happened thus far...

“To be honest, I think we should,” Darryl says. “It’s getting a little too...” He searches for the words. “Dangerous for us. With all the public attention we’re getting, and with all the...I think it’ll be better if we save Nick’s mom, then disband after this.”

"I have to agree with that," Eret says. "It's for the safety of the team."

"But what about the people we've helped?" Floris asks. "We've saved so many people, and now you're thinking about abandoning all that?"

"Besides, if Nick's mom has some twisted desire at the root of her heart, then I think we should go through with it for that reason," Harvey says. "Even if it's not for Blade, we should do it for Nick and his mom."

"Well, Nick?" Clay asks, glancing over at his best friend. Nick has yet to speak, gaze cast down on the table. "Are you willing to-"

Nick cuts him off with a sigh. "I...Honestly, I don't wanna do this," he mutters. "But I went on the Meta-Nav last night. And there was...there was a hit. There was a goddamn hit."

"So that means what Blade said was true after all." Clay hums, accessing his own Meta-Nav. "What's your mom's full name, Nick?"

"Molly Armstrong," Nick says. "Her name's Molly Armstrong."

Clay types that into the blank box as prompted by the app and the world pulses around them. Nick is right. There is a hit.

"Mom is suffering," Nick says, scratching his head. "Mom is suffering because of us. If what Blade is saying is true, she's going to falsify evidence, and dude, I'm totally not down for that." He stares at Clay straight in the eyes, burning resolve shining through the windows to his soul. "After stealing my mom's heart, then disbanding, she'd have an easier life. She wouldn't have to go through all this."

"Well," Clay says, shrugging. His hand dips beneath the table, latching onto George's. George lets him without even so much as blinking. "If Nick wants to do it, I'm alright with that too."

"If there are no objections, then I think we can begin infiltration soon, and we can tell Blade as well," George says.

"Okay so the deadline's on the twentieth of November, so we've got less than a month to secure an infiltration route and steal the Treasure," Clay says.

"Even on a tight schedule, we should still pace ourselves," Eret points out. "Or else we're going to tire out really fast."

"Honestly don't wanna get killed by Shadows on my last heist, so that's cool," Zak says.

"In that case, I'll inform Blade, and maybe we can begin infiltration tomorrow. That way, if we need to rest or anything, we will still have a lot of buffer time," Clay says.

"We'll do everything as per normal," Floris says. "And that means you'll have to decide when we send the calling card."

"Right then," Clay says. "It's settled. I'll see you all tomorrow, then."

"I've got to go buy dinner," George says, rising, chair leg scraping against the wooden floor. "There's a key under the doormat, by the way, so the last one to leave, please, *please* lock the door."

George heads out of the house, and the rest of the Thieves turn to face Clay.

This is strangely intimidating.

[“Are](#) you and George together?” Darryl asks.

Clay nearly chokes on his saliva.

“Dude, you were so obvious, holding his hand under the table and everything,” Zak says with a shit-eating grin.

“How did you even see that?” Clay’s ears burn, heat rushing to his cheeks. Was he *that* obvious?

“You really were? I thought it was a trick of the light!” Harvey cries, grin as wide as Zak’s.

“Oh my God. Yes, we’re together. I asked him out yesterday and he said yes. Now leave me alone,” Clay whines.

“Oh my goodness. George is going to favour Clay now,” Darryl says. “He’s going to give him all the boosts and healing and-“

“George wouldn’t do that.”

“We’ll just have to wait and see,” Eret says with a smirk.

With waiting appointments, each of the Thieves leave the residence, chatting about how Clay "finally had the balls to confess" and "they'd look so cute together". Clay sighs and packs his things, including Floris, into his bag and is about to leave too when his phone buzzes. Inspecting his messages, he halts in his tracks.

[Gina:](#) *I need to see you. Come up now.*

That sounds...ominous. Still, it can’t hurt to check on Gina. Has she finally found something on what she has been researching on?

“What is it?” Floris asks.

“Gina wants to see me,” Clay says, stuffing his phone into his pocket and heading up to the second floor. The stairs creak under his weight, and Clay walks to the end of the corridor, to Gina’s room. Knocking twice and hearing a “Come in!”, he enters.

Gina wheels away from her desk to glance up at Clay, and gestures to her bed. Clay sits down on it.

“There’s something I need to talk to you about.”

“What is it?” Clay asks, leaning closer to her computer screen.

“Wkzxj rw dqj, jdap d qrra dj jmkx,” Gina says, pulling up a window. Upon reading the lines, Clay realizes that it’s a transcript.

“Eke hrl ypj jmkx wzru hrlz izrjmpz’x fmrgp?”

Gina nods, wheeling away to look up at him. “Mrn’e hrl agrn?”

“Ipodlxp np xlxfpoj mku jrr,” Floris says. “Np blxj ekeg’j mdsp mdze pskepgop.”

“K xpp.” Gina turns back to her computer. The message in the transcript is clear: Jmkx fpzxrg, jmp jzdkjrz, mdx jr akqq jmp qpdepz rw jmp fmdgjru jmkpspx dge wrzop jmp zpxj jr xodjjpz, jr ip fkoape rww rgp ih rgp kg jmp xmdernx. Jmp qpdepz nkqq ip akqqpe elzkgy tlpjkrkggy dge zprfzjpe jr mdsp oruukjpe xlkokep. Jmp orgjkgp upgjdq xmljerngx nkqq ip iqdupe rg jmp fmdgjru jmkpspx kg mkekgy, nkjm jmp fliqko grgp jmp nkxpz.

The perfect crime.

“Ykgd...”

“K erg’j ndgj yprzyp jr er jmkx. K odg’j qpj mku xlqqh mkx mdgex nkjm...K blxj odg’j qpj mku akqq dghrgp,” Gina says. “Fqpdxp, hrl mdsp jr xjrf mku.”

Clay shifts his weight from one foot to the other. “Nmpg’x mp fqdggkgy rg erkgy jmkx?”

Gina bites her lip. “Rg grspuipz jnpgjkpm.”

“Jmpg jmdj erpxg’j qpdsp lx d qrj rw jkup jr orup lf nkjm d fqdg,” Floris muses.

“Ykgd, k’e qkap hrl jr orgjkgp fzrskekgy lx nkjm kgwrzudjkrgr dirlj yprzyp’x dojkrgr. Dx ulom dx hrl odg ydjmpz,” Clay says. He exhales loudly, nostrils flaring. “Np’qq qpj hrl agrn rw d fqdg dx xrrg dx np odg jmkga rw rgp.”

“Jmdgax,” Gina says, nodding. “Jmdga hrl xr ulom. Zpdqqh.”

“Kj’x gr fzriqpu,” Clay says with a wave of his hand. “k nrg’j ekp jmdj pdxkqh, dge k nrg’j qpj yprzyp ekzjh mkx mdgex dgh urzp jmdg mp dqzpdeh mdx; jmdj, I odg fzrukxp hrl.”

Clay leaves before George returns and locks the door with the key beneath the mat. He shivers as a chilly breeze whips by him. God, he should have brought a scarf.

With this new revelation, it is, perhaps, time to call for an emergency meeting with the Thieves... minus the traitor, of course.

*

10/27 – TUESDAY – EVENING

Zak: guys

Zak: I’ve got a great idea

Zak: you know how everyone’s so down and stuff

Zak: well guess what Halloween is just around the corner

Me: with all the stuff that’s been going on

Me: Halloween totally slipped my mind

Me: I hate Halloween

Zak: WHAT WHY

Zak: why are u so weird

Me: IM NOT WEIRD

Nick: Clay is scared of everything

Harvey: but he's so fearless in the palaces

Me: that's because my personas are with me

Me: ITS NOT A CRIME TO BE SCARED OK

Harvey: I never said it is

Zak: BACK ON TOPIC

Zak: lets go trick or treating

Me: wtf

George: aren't we a little too old for that

Zak: no

Eret: we only have a few days to procure costumes

Eret: let's go down to pointe one day

Eret: I have my eyes on a strawberry dress lately

Nick: omg not that dress

Eret: do you have a problem with that?

Nick: no I mean I just see it everywhere on twitter now

Nick: hey maybe that can be your Halloween costume

Eret: perhaps you should sleep with one eye open, nick

Zak: image.png

Zak: haunted house leggo

Me: NO

Me: OVER MY DEAD BODY

George: im gonna have to agree with clay here

Zak: George are you scared

George: a little? But it's nothing I cant handle

George: at least I can sit through horror movies...a little?

Zak: good u can cling to clay or he can cling to u

Me: NO

A notification drops down. A private message from George.

George: did you tell them already

Me: They just found out and bombarded me with questions

Me: I had no choice pls don't be mad

George: lol no im not just curious is all

His phone continues to vibrate incessantly, but Clay knows that he'd never get the vacuuming done if he keeps replying to messages. He'd check them later, when he's about to get ready for bed.

In the meantime, he shall continue to kill his ears with the roar of the vacuum machine.

*

10/28 – WEDNESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“What the hell is he doing here?” Zak nearly spits his water out when Clay enters the house with someone else in tow.

“It's an additional condition,” Clay says. “Fucking texted me at midnight.”

“What do you mean additional condition?” Harvey asks.

“Well, he wants in,” Clay says. “Because he's, apparently, been to the Metaverse before already.”

“I'm sure I can handle myself,” Blade says, shrugging. Clay believes this man can stare death in the face and not even so much as flinch.

“It's dangerous where we go,” Floris says. “Are you certain?”

“Yeah.”

“Stick close to us,” Clay says.

“And don't drag us down,” Nick mutters.

“Oh, I won't.”

Clay goes over the plan with the team again, for Blade's benefit. They are to begin infiltration today, or at least attempt to, by figuring out the keywords to Mrs Armstrong's Palace. While they've gotten her name down, they've yet to work out what the location or distortion is.

“She's a prosecutor, right?” Eret says. “So maybe her Palace would be her office since she spends a lot of time there.”

No hit.

“What about the courthouse?” George asks.

That one's a hit.

“Now all that's left to figure out what she sees the courthouse as.”

“It's a place where she has to win all the time,” Blade says. “She talks about winning a lot, so-“

“An arena?” Darryl tries. No luck.

“The Colosseum?”

No hit.

“Technically, the Colosseum is just a huge arena,” Harvey points out.

“What about an arcade?” Nick tries.

“Are you serious?” Clay gives him a deadpan look when the Meta-Nav informs him that there’s no hit.

Blade raises his head from a moment of deep contemplation and says, “A casino.”

The world pulses, and voids open up around them, sucking them straight into the Metaverse. Clay glances around. George’s house looks the same as ever, but that’s probably because the distortion doesn’t extend so far. There’s only one way to know, and that’s to head out into the streets.

“Right, gang,” Clay says. “Let’s get down to the Supreme Court.”

*

[The Supreme](#) Court district is as busy as they’d expect it to be, and much more solemn as well. People in suits and dresses stride around like worker bees, phones and briefcases in hands, heads down, utterly absorbed in their own business calls. Clay guesses these are cognitive beings since they’re in the Metaverse and all.

“Our clothes haven’t changed,” Zak notices, glancing down at himself.

“That’s because the Palace ruler doesn’t see us as a threat yet,” Floris says. He’s still a quadrupedal fox strutting alongside them, a strange sight when their environment is nothing short of surreal, especially when the biggest, flashiest casino that Clay has ever seen comes into view. Then again, it’s not like he’s seen many casinos.

Dome-shaped, its exterior walls made entirely out of glass, the casino glows a bright yellow. Spotlights beam pools of light into the sky, putting on a light show for whoever cares to watch.

“What’re you looking at?” Clay asks, following Blade’s gaze into the distance.

“That’s the police station,” Blade says. “It’s not as flashy as the casino.”

“Then that means that the distortion hasn’t extended so far,” Floris says. “It’s the same reason George’s house hasn’t changed either.

“Oh, yeah, I get it,” Blade says, nodding. Well, Clay thinks, *he* didn’t get that the first time Floris explained it to him.

[As they](#) approach the casino, Clay’s uniform is replaced by a heavier coat, his face suddenly less bare. There’s no need to look down to realize that he’s now wearing his Phantom Thief outfit, the hem of his coat trailing behind him as he walks boldly towards the casino.

“So, since this place is born from a person’s cognition, when the Palace ruler – I’m gonna assume it’s Molly here – thinks that we are now going to infiltrate her casino, she’s going to see you guys as threats to the Treasure you’re going to steal from her. Am I wrong?” Blade says, arms folded.

"I really hate this guy," Sapnap grumbles.

"Okay, so it's safe to assume that Blade doesn't have a Persona, right?" Dream says.

Fundy tilts his head. "Probably? Honestly, I'm not too sure of these details."

"A Persona? Like, the psychology term?" Blade asks. "The face or mask that you present to the outside world?"

"Personas in this world refer to our powers, but I guess you could say that it was born out of our rebellious spirit," Navi says.

Blade hums.

"Anyway, our Personas give us the ability to even harm the monsters in this place," Dream says. "If you don't have a Persona, then you're in a lot of danger."

"I will make sure not to get in your way, then."

"Okay, so first things first, we go by codenames here," Eret says. "That's Dream, Sapnap, Fundy, Skeppy, Bad, TapL and Navi. And I'm Eret."

"You don't have a codename?"

"I don't usually use my real name in the real world anyway, so I decided to just use my nickname."

"Hmm."

"So on that note, we need to think of a codename for you," Dream says. "Or you could think of one yourself."

"Techno," Blade says. "I think Techno's a good name."

"Great," Dream says. "It's decided then. As long as we're in the Metaverse, you'll be known as Techno."

"I'm honoured."

Dream turns his attention back to the casino. There's no way Phantom Thieves would approach by the main entrance. It would be classy, but they'd just get mowed down by whatever Shadows in there. Dream looks around. There should be a side entrance somewhere...

"There's an open skylight up...there," Navi says, gesturing to the side of the dome a fair distance from the main entrance. Indeed, Dream can see a tiny glass panel propped up, exposing a hidden entrance that he would have missed had Navi not told him.

Still, to get up there, they'd need to scale the dome itself.

"Thanks, babe," Dream leans over and presses a kiss to Navi's temple, the latter spluttering. Dream laughs, and TapL gags.

"Get a room, oh my God," Skeppy groans.

Fundy, having ignored them, activates his grappling hook, the slender wire shooting straight upwards, the hook catching onto the edge of the open skylight. With a push of the same button, the wire retracts and Fundy goes flying. Dream and the others follow, with Navi transporting Techno

with Necronomicon.

Dream hops through the skylight, landing on steel beams that give him a good view of the casino tables below. Most of the customers are cognitive beings, while the dealers are Shadows.

Now he's just got to find them a way down without drawing too much attention from either the Shadows or the cognitive beings. He spots an open vent at the other end of the room and a clear path of connected steel beams. He leads the Thieves across, dark shapes shielded by the beams, only the tell-tale signs of coats and robes fluttering above the heads of the customers.

Dream wriggles through the vent, crawling on all fours down a slope, before emerging at the first floor.

He is about to take a step forward when he realizes just who is staring at him.

It's Mrs Armstrong's Shadow, a black leather dress hanging off her shoulders complete with stockings and shiny, black stilettos. She wears a thick layer of makeup, mascara lining her eyes and puce painting her lips. The rim of her hat is decorated with familiar symbols – diamonds, spades, clubs and hearts.

["Welcome](#) to my casino, dear Phantom Thieves," Shadow Armstrong says, arms spread wide as if to embrace them. She smiles widely, eyes almost disappearing into crescents. "And I see that my dear children are amongst you lot of filthy Thieves."

Sapnap grits his teeth.

"Why is she here? And why's she dressed so strange?" Techno asks.

"That's her Shadow, not the real person," Dream explains. "She's the Palace ruler."

"Oh?" Shadow Armstrong angles her head, eyes settling on Techno. "Who do we have here? The Detective Prince?"

Techno grunts.

"It's the little boy who hogs all the glory just because he's good-looking and young," Shadow Armstrong croons. "The *child* who understands nothing but wants to get all the credit anyway."

"I'm not a child." That is the most annoyance in Techno's voice that Dream has ever heard.

"Aren't you? You're just someone who does whatever they're told. Someone who just wants to seek approval of others. In other words, you're nothing but a child."

"How does that make me a child?" Now anger fills Techno's voice as he steps forth.

"Of course. Get angry. Throw a tantrum. That's all children are good for," Shadow Armstrong's taunting smile never leaves her face. "Whiny, irritating *things* that just get on everyone's nerves..."

"*You* are seriously getting on my nerves." Dream has to leap back when blue flames erupt from Techno's feet. Could it be...?

In response to the burst of power, Shadows emerges from swirling voids that appear by Shadow Armstrong's feet, two leopard-like creatures wielding a blade in each hand, a green cape around their necks.

[“You don’t](#) know what I’ve been through to get where I am. You don’t know what I’ve had to do to win everyone’s respect.” Techno continues walking up to Shadow Armstrong, footprints of blue flame blazing where he steps, a faint shape flickering behind him. “You just want to blame everyone else for everything that went wrong.”

Have you decided to thread the path of strife? Very well. Let us proceed with our contract at once.

Shadow Armstrong snarls. “How dare you-“

“I’m kinda glad I could work with you, and I’m sorta glad that I could work with the Thieves because you, clearly, need a change of heart.” The shape above Techno gradually becomes more vivid. It looks like a...a motorcycle?

I am thou, thou art I.

Techno’s uniform is now replaced with a cloak reminiscent of a king’s lined with fur, a pink vest blooming over a pristine white tunic, complete with black pants and black leather shoes.

You have finally found your own justice...Please, never lose sight of it again.

Techno’s mask materializes, resembling the face of a boar’s with a crown sitting atop its head, tusks gleaming in the light of the casino.

This memorable day marks your graduation from your false self.

Techno rips his mask off in a single, swift move, accompanied with a spray of blood. His Persona fully forms, descending to the ground. Techno sits astride it, the Persona’s engine revving.

[“Now this](#) is what I’m talking about.” Techno’s tone has completely changed. It has become something freer, something more sincere, less restrained. His Persona surges forward and the two Shadows jump forth, ready to protect their ruler.

Techno swerves, Johanna’s front wheel screeching against the marble floor as he knocks both Shadows away with the bike’s back wheel.

“Oh my God, that is so fucking cool!” Skeppy shrieks. “I want a motorcycle too!”

The two Shadows pounce on Techno from opposite ends. Techno smirks, dropping to the floor and both Shadows crash into each other. Techno stomps heavily and a pillar of cyan flares to the ceiling, completely decimating the two Shadows.

His power is so strong that Dream can even feel it from here, burning his skin as he throws his arms up to defend himself. The pillar fizzles away once not even a trace of the Shadows remain, not even the shroud of ash that they should have been reduced to.

“Blood for the blood god,” Techno says, unmistakable triumph in his voice as he dismisses Johanna with a wave, before collapsing to one knee, chest heaving with the exertion.

“Whoa, are you okay?” Fundy runs up to him, green tendrils of healing magic curling around his fingertips.

“Guys, Armstrong is gone,” Navi glances around till his gaze lands on a silhouette standing in the elevator in the middle of the foyer.

“I will be seeing you at the manager’s level, Phantom Thieves,” Shadow Armstrong says, a

triumphant smile on her face as the elevator ascends, the car rushing up the glass tube up to the higher floors.

Shadows begin to pop up all around them, gooey black sludge seeping from the floor and walls.

“I think we should head back for now,” Eret says, offering Techno a shoulder. Techno initially declines the help, but as soon as he attempts to stand, he nearly topples, with TapL catching his other arm to steady him.

“Yeah,” Dream agrees. “Let’s go.” They can’t fight so many strong Shadows with an exhausted companion. He shoots a Shadow right in its face, the bullet piercing its body, black gunk coating the walls. Guess one bullet won’t do the trick anymore.

“Run!” They’re too strong for you!” Navi shouts, panicked.

Dream shoots a couple more Shadows, most taking the hits with the endurance of a stone wall. Bad manages to cause some splash damage with his fireballs, and Skeppy immobilizes a few with his icicle spears.

Fundy is the first through the vent, followed by Eret and Blade, then TapL, then Bad, Skeppy, Sapnap.

“Dream! Hurry!” Navi hops out of Necronomicon, the Persona fizzling away as Dream shoots his final Shadow.

“Go in first!” Dream shouts. He’s run out of bullets, the chamber completely empty. Goddamn it. Navi squeezes through the vent and Dream follows straight after, just managing to avoid the slash of a sword by a few seconds.

The rest of the Thieves have already made it to the skylight, with Fundy waiting for the two of them. Navi leaps across the beams, movements deft, with Dream following right behind him.

“Shadow behind-!” Navi stops abruptly, throwing a glance back. Dream nearly hurtles himself off the beam on which he stands, the beam swaying back and forth.

“Oh no you don’t!” Fundy summons Zorro, sending wind sickles at the Kikuri-Hime behind Dream. Dream ducks, the sickles slicing off locks of his hair as they sail above his head, cutting into the Shadow. The Shadow screams and falls, giving the two of them time to continue their journey across to the skylight.

Navi climbs out of the skylight and leaps into the air, into the embrace of Necronomicon’s body.

“Dream! Fundy! Jump!”

The duo do as they’re told, taking a literal leap of faith from the skylight. Necronomicon’s tentacles shoot and slither with lightning speed in the air, curling around their stomachs and lowering them to the ground, where the rest of the Thieves are gathered.

Techno seems to have regained some of his strength, looking more than regal in that king’s outfit of his, red cape trailing by his ankles.

“Do you have to go through that whenever you steal someone’s desires? I don’t think this is very cost-effective in terms of time and effort,” Techno says with a breathless chuckle.

“It’s really only the awakening that really drains you,” Bad says. “You won’t feel as tired the next

time.”

“Really. There will be a next time?” Techno asks with a grin.

“If you’d like to join us,” Dream says, hands tucked into his pockets.

“For this operation, I don’t think I’d mind,” Techno says. “Besides, you’re not in any position to refuse.”

He’s not wrong.

“As long as you don’t drag us down,” Sapnap says.

“Now that we have a new member, we’re gonna have to add them to the chatgroup,” TapL says.

“Yeah,” Dream says. “As for the infiltrations, we tend to go on Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday so you should keep those dates free.”

“I’m always free,” Techno says. “Just text me the time that we should meet.”

“Of course.”

Dream accesses the Meta-Nav and taps a button. Immediately, the world pulses around them again, and the casino begins to waver, to be replaced with the grandiose structure that is the Supreme Court.

“Returning to the real world. Thank you for your hard work.”

*

10/27 – TUESDAY – EVENING

“No! No, no, no, no, no!” Clay shrieks, squeezing his eyes shut right before his avatar dies in Phasmophobia. “Oh my God, what the fuck, oh my God...”

He can only hear laughter from Zak and Nick, guffaws piercing holes in his dignity. George chuckles mirthfully.

“That’s it, I’m not playing this game anymore,” Clay mumbles, face buried in his hands. His dignity has not just been stabbed through with knives of mockery but ripped and shredded beyond recognition. “I don’t know *how* you convinced me to play this...”

“Because you still had your pride. And, uh, some honour?” Even Floris can hardly control himself, body convulsing with laughter as he rolls about on the bed.

“George, ask him to continue,” Nick says. “I want to hear him scream more.”

“Maybe Floris can play in his place,” George says. Maybe Clay should just press that tempting Deafen button...but then he wouldn’t be able to hear George and that angelic voice of his...

“I’m totally good with a computer. Give it here,” Floris demands.

“No, I’ll play another round,” Clay says stubbornly. Maybe he should opt for a less...a less intense role. Maybe he should just watch the cams in the van...

“Sure, if you say so,” Zak says with a wide grin that Clay can see from his bed.

“We should have Gogy play with us all the time,” Nick says. “Clay is so whipped it’s actually painful.”

Clay groans, preparing himself for another game of scares and horrors and...Oh, the things he does for George...

This is going to be a terribly long night ahead of him.

Chapter End Notes

the message in the transcript is clear...so very clear hahahha i laughed to myself for a full minute and had to get away from my computer after copy-and-pasting that whole block of text

hmmmmm uk that all-out attack scene that every character gets if you kill all enemies on screen? i was thinking of techno doing this cool-ass pose slotting his sabre back into its sheath with the biggest grin and the words at the back just going "Blood for the Blood God" while the enemies just burst into a splatter of blood

Pumpkins

Chapter Summary

s links

Chapter Notes

finally, FINALLY getting back to doing s links wow that was one hell of a ride hahaha

hope you guys enjoyed that part! it's gonna get a hella lot chiller from here until 11/20 because it's, well, palace infiltration!

also pls bear with me i have never carved a pumpkin lol

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

10/28 – WEDNESDAY – MORNING

“Did you hear? The pretty boy’s dating the delinquent.”

“Yeah, who wouldn’t have after that whole embarrassing confession.”

“I can’t believe he had the guts to do that!”

Clay ducks his head as he enters the classroom, pretending not to have heard those two girls gossiping. He walks up to his desk and stuffs his bag under his table, with Floris crawling out of it. He leans back over the desk behind him where George is busy scrolling through...whatever he’s scrolling through.

“Gimme a kiss,” Clay says. George stares at him with the most unamused expression. “I wanna do the Spiderman kiss.”

“We’re in public,” George deadpans, then his voice drops below even a whisper. “There are already rumours.”

“They’re just r-“ Clay is cut off abruptly when George bends down and pecks his forehead.

“That’s all I’m giving you for now.” There is no hiding the reddening of George’s face as he stares down at his phone, a hand over his mouth. “Maybe...after school or something.”

“You mean it?”

“Of course. I’m your boyfriend, right?” George says, meeting Clay’s eyes for a mere second before darting away. God, Clay can hardly believe how cute George looks like this. Moreover, their first date tonight? An amazing prospect.

The teacher walks into the class and Clay has to turn to face the front. If only he could have

swapped seats with George, then he can stare at him for as long as he would be physically able to...

*

10/28 – WEDNESDAY – EVENING

After a wonderful time at the arcade, doing some Halloween shopping to spice up George's house a little bit, especially since Gina's been pestering him about it recently and having the most delicious dinner that he's has ever eaten, Clay returns home with a stupid grin on his face.

"Oh my God. I don't even *need* to ask where you went," Nick mutters, sparing Clay only a single glance before he turns back to his computer.

Clay drops his bag by the desk and crashes into bed. Floris lets out a strangled scream and leaps off, smashing into Nick's face and sending the rolling chair straight into the wall.

Nick yelps, fingers scrabbling blindly at Floris as Floris peels himself off Nick's face, falling onto the ground with a thud. Clay, snapped from his trance, leans over the railing to watch the drama.

"What the fuck was that for?" Nick screeches.

"I did that on instinct!"

"Your first *instinct* when Clay comes back with that sickly look in his eyes is to jump on my fucking f--"

"What in the world is going on here?" The door opens with a creak, and Mrs Armstrong pokes her head inside, lips twisted into an irritated frown.

Clay's eyes dart back to Floris but the fox is gone, having squirmed under Nick's desk, hiding in the shadows. Nick and Clay stop in their tracks.

"Uh...nothing."

"Just...keep it down, alright?" Mrs Armstrong says, pinching the bridge of her nose, exhaustion prominent in her voice. "I have to get this email out by tonight."

With that, she closes the door, leaving Clay and Nick in silence.

"Well, uh..." Clay scratches his head. "Sorry?"

"It's kinda Floris' fault," Nick mumbles, turning back to his computer, uncharacteristically quiet. Floris crawls up to Clay's bed with his tail between his legs.

"Sorry."

"It's fine. We can't let Nick's mom find out about you," Clay says, patting Floris' head. "You were pretty fast, though."

Floris perks up at that. He snuggles over to Clay, worming under the sheets in an effort to keep warm.

"So, how was your date?"

That grin returns to Clay's face, and Floris has come to the realization that right there and then he's

asked the wrong question.

*

10/29 – THURSDAY – LUNCHTIME

“Let’s go see our exam scores,” Darryl says, turning around in his seat. Clay looks up, expression one of extreme sleepiness.

“Wuzzat?” he drawls.

“Exam. Scores.”

“Why are you so excited about this?” George asks. “Of all the things you choose to be excited about...”

“I’m not excited,” Darryl whines. “I’m anxious.”

Clay stands and yawns. “Alright, fine. Let’s go see it.”

The trio did well, surprisingly, with Clay scoring just a little lower than both Darryl and George at every subject, which, to be honest, leaves a bitter taste in his mouth.

“Well, I guess that’s that,” George says, laughing.

“I think we did pretty good, honestly,” Clay says.

“I thought I’d do worse than that,” Darryl says, obvious relief in his voice as they stride back to class.

Yeah, Clay has to agree with Darryl. He could definitely have done worse than being in the top ten in their level.

*

10/29 – THURSDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“My mother’s finally getting treatment. Rehabilitation and all that,” Niki says. “She sees a therapist, goes to a support group and all that. I’m glad for her.”

“I’m glad for her too,” Clay says, harvesting this pumpkin that has grown to an incredible size. Just in time for Halloween too. “She seems to be doing well.”

“Yes, she is,” Niki says, voice bright. “I think we’re planning on family therapy as well. She says she wants me to forgive her for all she’s done.”

The change of heart must have had a more drastic effect than Clay realised.

“The thing is that I’ve forgiven her,” Niki says, placing her trowel aside. “All I ask for is that we can be a happy family again.”

“You’re one step closer to that goal,” Clay says, returning her smile. “And that’s a noble goal too.”

“Right.” Niki strides over to where he’s harvesting the pumpkins, inspecting the orange vegetables on the table, dirt still clinging onto their bottoms. “I think these will do.”

“What are we going to do with them?” Clay asks, heaving the final giant pumpkin onto the counter.

“I was planning on using them to decorate the school. Get into the Halloween spirit, you know?” Niki says with a grin. “How about it?”

That’s an excellent idea, Clay has to say. They’d have to find people to help carve the pumpkins though. With that many, there’s no way they’d be able to finish it in time for Halloween with just two people.

Then again, there’s always them...

“Just leave them to me,” Clay says. “I know people who can help.”

“Really? But I can’t let you do all the work...”

“Trust me. They’re going to wow you.”

Niki laughs. “I’m sure they will.”

“The pumpkins will be done by tomorrow. I guarantee it,” Clay says with absolute confidence. Fake it till you make it, they say.

Niki leaves him with the pumpkins and the key to the gardening room since she needs to leave earlier today to spend some time with her mother at the rehab centre.

The sun is still pretty high in the sky, showing no signs of setting anytime soon.

Phone in hand, he calls the brigade.

*

10/29 – THURSDAY – EVENING

“Does this look good?” Harvey spins his pumpkin around, and Clay is greeted by the pumpkin’s toothy smile.

“Not bad for a first attempt,” Darryl says.

“I’ve never been good at crafts,” Zak mutters, one eye squeezed shut as he attempts to get that one cut just right.

Only half of the Thieves showed up, excluding Clay, the others being Floris, who was just sitting in Clay’s bag anyway, Darryl, Zak and Harvey. Nick has to fill in for a fellow co-worker’s shift. Eret has some Student Council matters to attend to and George needs to buy groceries.

“I actually...didn’t expect anyone to answer. Though I would have been really sad,” Clay says. He compares his pumpkin to Harvey’s. Sure, he may not have been the best pumpkin carver ever but surely it can’t be worse than that of a first-timer’s.

“That would really have been sad,” Darryl says absently, inspecting his pumpkin, arguably the best one out of all to theirs. “I’ve just gotten into the groove of pumpkin carving recently.”

It makes Clay wonder just how many pumpkins Darryl has been carving.

They’ve actually finished carving about ten pumpkins between the four of them, with Floris just

hanging out lazily by the side and watching them stab the pumpkins.

“I want some pumpkin pie now,” Zak says, holding up the completed pumpkin and admiring it. “Like, right now.”

“The baking club’s room is just down the corner,” Darryl says flatly.

By the time they’re done with another ten pumpkins for a grand total of twenty, the bucket used to collect the pumpkin pulp and seeds is already full and the sun’s already set, a blanket of stars twinkling in the sky. They could probably get rid of the bucket’s contents in the dumpster outside the school, but someone *has* to deal with the bucket itself...

Clay moves to wash his hands at the sink and packs his things, Floris hopping into his bag. Harvey offers to handle the bucket. Darryl and Zak leave first, since they’ve got a movie to catch, leaving Clay all alone in the gardening room.

Niki texted that she would bring candles tomorrow, and she would come early to distribute a pumpkin to each class. Given that each level has five classes, they’d have five left over. Perhaps putting one in the principal’s office? Or right outside the faculty?

“For someone screaming a lot yesterday, you’d doing a pretty good job.”

“What good job?” Clay starts, only to look up from his phone and realize exactly what Floris means.

The entire corridor is deserted and empty. And dark. No, it’s more than dark. It’s pitch-black. It’s pitch-black and holy shit is that an owl? Did the floorboard just creak? Is there someone...?

A door bangs behind him and Clay screams, a spike of adrenaline rushing through him as he stumbles forward, his heart beating at unimaginable speeds. What the hell was that? What the *effing hell* was that? Not even daring to glance behind, Clay runs.

“What the hell? Oi! Hey!” Floris shrieks. “What was that? Why are we running?”

Who the fuck cares? Clay wants to get the fuck out of here right now! Away from that hooting owl outside, away from whatever just slammed that door and the howling of the winds through the windows-

“Boo!”

Clay shrieks, the most high-pitched sound he’s ever made in his life and he lands hard on his rear, tears already in his eyes. Oh God, please let that not be a ghost girl out to eat his soul or something...

“Oh my God, I thought Dream was fearless.”

Clay knows that voice. He looks up and sees Zak staring down at him with the biggest grin on his face. Guess who’s number one on Clay’s To-Murder list now.

“Well, first of all, I’m not Dream now,” Clay says, scowling. “Also, I thought you had a fucking movie to catch.”

“If you hadn’t come around in the next few seconds I would have left.”

“Where’d Darryl go? Don’t tell me he was in on this too!”

“Nah. Told him I left some stuff behind,” Zak says. “The temptation was too good to resist.”

“Second of all, fuck you,” Clay says, reaching a hand out to him. Zak takes it and pulls him to his feet.

“I think I broke a few bones,” Floris mumbles dazedly as Clay gets back on his feet. Oh crap. Clay probably landed on him.

“Zak? Are you there?” Darryl strides down the hallway, his phone flashlight shining a beam of light that would have blinded the three of them if they stared straight into it. From behind him, Clay can see the relieving glow of the foyer lights that would take him straight to the principal’s office, where he’s supposed to return the key, and the entrance.

He waves goodbye to Darryl and Zak, this time making sure that the duo have truly left the school before pushing open the door to the principal’s office.

*

Chapter End Notes

fortune arcana rank 7 -> 8 (fundy)

hanged man arcana rank 8 -> 9 (niki)

kindness +3 (gardening)

guts +10 (that whole skeppy scaring him thing)

Casino of Envy: Infiltration Begin

Chapter Summary

woooo casino infiltration start!

Chapter Notes

hello

sorry this is a little late im working on the 11/20 chapters simultaneously so im like writing 2 chapters at the same time...also was pretty busy today lol

if anyone'd like to post fanart of this fic, I'm @huhufrostwrites on Twitter! I'm so honoured that people are willing to draw fanart for this fic (i've never had that happen before :3)! I would totally love to see how u guys would draw the thieves in palace/battle scenes or even during their daily life!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

10/30 – FRIDAY – MORNING

“These look lovely,” Niki says with a smile as she places one of Zak’s pumpkins onto the teacher’s desk of one of the seniors’ classrooms. She removes its lid and places a burning scented candle inside. In the dim light of the empty classroom, it looks spooky. Spooky enough for Halloween tomorrow.

“And that’s the last one,” Clay says.

“It is,” Niki says, nodding. “Thanks for your help. I’m sorry to wake you up so early for this.”

Clay waves dismissively. “It’s alright. All for the Halloween mood.”

They part ways at the staircase landing on the second floor, with Niki and Clay heading opposite directions back to their respective classrooms.

*

10/30 – FRIDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

A Shadow falls to Dream’s bullet, bursting into black sludge. A fair distance away, Techno stabs another Shadow through its middle, the Shadow bursting into a cloud of ash. There. That’s the final guard Shadow on this level.

Meanwhile, the rest of the Thieves have gathered around the elevator that Shadow Armstrong had gone up from the other day.

“We’re going to need a member’s card if we want to go further up,” Navi says.

“She said to see us at the manager’s floor, right?” Bad says. “That sounds like the highest floor to me.”

“I don’t think we’ll be able to mooch a member’s card off anyone here,” Dream says, glancing around at the cognitive beings engrossed in their games of chance. If they’re playing on this level, it’s unlikely that they would have got one.

“Then we should take a look around the back,” Techno says.

“The back?” Sappnap asks.

“The staff area,” Techno says. “If they are able to promote a person to a member on this level, they’ve got to have some spare cards lying around in the back.”

“That makes sense,” Eret says. “Is there any way to this staff area?”

“There’s a door over there,” Navi says, gesturing to said door reachable by a flight of stairs, with no guards in sight. “Let’s try that.”

The door is, surprisingly, unlocked, allowing Dream and the others passage through a cramped corridor decorated with vases and baubles in the shape of the four poker suits. At the same time, unfortunately, they come face to face with a Shadow guard.

“Shit!” Dream summons Atropos the same time the guard Shadow transforms into a woman of sickly green skin, sporting wavy lavender hair and a haughty expression on its near-featureless face. A wave of her hand is enough to send a crackling wave of electricity at the ground.

Sappnap slams his cudgel into the ground, Seiten Taisei materializing in all its glory. The electricity is drawn to the cudgel like iron to a magnet, the makeshift lightning rod nullifying any threat the electricity would have presented.

“It’s a Queen Mab...don’t use Zio or Agi skills,” Navi says from within Necronomicon’s shell. “It’s weak to Garu!”

Dream doesn’t have a Persona with that element. “Fundy!”

Fundy is already on it, summoning his signature twin cyclones that rip through the corridor, blasting away everything in their paths, including the Shadow itself. Sliced into pieces by the accompanying wind sickles, Queen Mab bursts into a shroud of ash.

The Thieves rush down the ruined corridor, knowing that sooner or later, Shadows are going to converge on them. There is a door up ahead and Dream barrels into it, throwing it open and revealing several Shadows in the middle of a game of poker.

Well then.

“TapL!” Dream shouts.

TapL readies his grenade launcher and fires a shell which explodes upon contact with the ground, hardly giving their adversaries any time to respond. Those that survive the blast change into their monstrous forms – two Unicorns, another Queen Mab and a Valkyrie astride her steed.

“The Unicorn’s weak to Eiga skills and the Valkyrie is weak to Fire!”

Dream switches to Hell Biker, who throws forth a sphere of darkness that swallows up anything

and everything in its path, completely vanquishing one of the Unicorns.

The Valkyrie dodges Bad's fireballs deftly, her steed prancing about wildly as she brings her spear above her head, about to plunge it into Skeppy's back, Skeppy who is too occupied by the Queen Mab. Dream is about to pounce at the Valkyrie, stopped mid-step by the other Unicorn neighing and bucking, refusing to let him near.

"Skeppy!" Bad stomps the ground, a pillar of fire engulfing the Valkyrie and knocking it to the ground, her spear flying out of her hand. Skeppy spins and slashes with his katana, cutting her in two and Valkyrie goes out with an agonized screech.

Dream ducks as Unicorn fires a beam of light from its horn that would definitely have put Dream in a severely disadvantaged position. The roar of a motorcycle pierces his ear as Techno zooms by on Johanna, circling the Unicorn, speed so high that the duo is nothing but a blur, forming a wall of cyan around the Unicorn, giving Dream the opportunity he needs to send Unicorn to the depths of the underworld with a vortex of darkness from beneath its hooves.

Dream yelps when someone bumps into him from behind. Glancing back, it's Fundy, having taken a terrible hit from the final Shadow remaining, the Queen Mab.

The Queen Mab flicks her wrist. Dream throws himself over Fundy. He has no Persona that resists Zio, so he's going to have to take the hi-

"No!" Necronomicon swoops in, erecting a green barrier that reflects the rain of thunderbolts back at the Queen Mab, sparing Dream and Fundy from a horrible fate.

Queen Mab, caught off guard by the turn of events, falls victim to an arrow of light fired by Robin Hood, and it melts into a pile of dust.

Dream stands, helping Fundy up, breathing a sigh of relief. That was close. If Navi hadn't...

[Navi](#) dismisses Necronomicon. "Dream! Are you alright?" He's checking for injuries immediately, frowning at the gash on Dream's arm. He didn't even realize he cut himself there. It was forgotten during the heat of battle.

"See, I told you," Bad mutters. Skeppy laughs.

"I'm fine," Dream says, engulfed by a warm green glow courtesy of Fundy. "See?"

Navi's chuckle sounds forced.

"What've you got there?" Eret asks.

Techno retrieves something from the ground, a card that seems to have fallen from the table when they were fighting. Or maybe one of the Shadows dropped it. It doesn't look like a poker card. With the barcode behind it, Dream dares to say that it is a security cardkey.

"Let's keep it on us for now. Maybe we'll need to use it somewhere," Dream says, holding out his hand, and Techno hands it over.

The room has nothing left of interest, but Dream can hear footsteps outside clearly. Their fighting must have drawn unwanted attention; they'll need another way out or they're going to risk bumping into the guards and getting sucked into fights that will drain their energy.

"This way," Navi says, noticing a vent above their heads. Necronomicon's strong tentacles peel the

vent grate away, tossing it against the wall, “Just Ender Pearl up.”

Dream is the first to throw his Ender Pearl in a smooth arc, flying into the vent, the final portion of its path obscured by the sharp corner of the vent. When it lands, Dream finds himself in a cramped passageway on his hands and knees.

“It’s safe!” Dream calls, wincing as his voice reverberates throughout the vent. He wonders if he’d be able to rupture his eardrums if he screamed loud enough.

The Thieves enter the vent one by one. First Fundy, followed by Bad, then Techno...

“What are you doing here?”

Dream jumps. Crap! They’ve been discovered! He’s got to-

The grate slamming against the opening of the vent startles even Fundy who lets out a stifled screech.

“Go!” Navi’s voice crackles. No, he’s getting further and further away! “We’ll catch up with you later!”

George! Dream wants to shout. Shit! This is his fault! He should have known that it was only a matter of time till the Shadows found them! He should have been the last one through, and now he’s left *half* of his team behind-

“What are you waiting for?” Techno asks. How can he be so calm? He’s the least experienced out of all of them and yet he speaks as if he doesn’t give two shits about what’s happening to the rest of their team. “The guy told you to go, so you go.”

“But Skeppy and the others...” Bad’s voice is filled with rising panic, head angled back, tensing when the shattering of ice resounds from the room below.

“You trust them, don’t you?” Techno asks, sounding more irritated than anything. “They’re more capable than you think they are.”

“He’s right, Dream,” Fundy says. “He’s absolutely right.”

Dream’s heart clenches. As much as he hates to admit it, he has to move on. Trust his team. Trust them to get out of there alive.

“Come on, let’s go,” Dream says resolutely. They’re going to find the membership cards and meet back up with the rest.

*

No Shadows about. With only Fundy’s nose to help them, it’s hard figuring out the exact location of any nearby guards. Determining that there aren’t any in the vicinity, Dream dismantles the grate and tosses it to the ground.

It lands with the loudest bang he’s ever heard.

Then, silence.

One.

Two.

Three.

Dream leaps from the vent, dodging the vent grate and lands soundlessly on the carpet. Ensuring that the coast is clear, he signals to the other three who jump down next to him.

White, alabaster walls covered from ceiling to floor with the four poker suits stretch on for as far as the eye can see. At the very end of the hallway lies a single door, a card reader fixed to the side of the wall. Dream retrieves his cardkey from the deep recesses of his coat pocket and taps it against the scanner.

The lock clicks and Dream pushes it open, revealing a Shadow in a guard's uniform standing by a huge display of monitors, baton in hand. He whirls around as soon as they approach, eyes bulging.

"What are you doing in here? I thought you-" The Shadow glances back to another monitor, one depicting a fierce battle between their comrades and a multitude of Shadows.

"Hand over those cards," Techno says, walking up to the Shadow and points to the stack of cards behind it, resting ever so innocently on the table. "We need those."

"Now hold on a second," the Shadow growls. "You're the Phantom Thieves, aren't you?"

"So what if we are?" Fundy taunts, already drawing his sabre.

"I have full permission to kill you lot!" the Shadow snarls. His movements are jerky, body convulsing, bending over backwards as viscous sludge drips from its orifices, pooling on the ground in gooey messes.

["Oh God."](#) Techno mutters.

The Shadow bursts into a bipedal elephant, dressed from head to toe in shiny, golden trinkets and glimmering cloths. Its yellow eyes are fixed on them, shimmering sword in hand.

Its initial swing was a poorly-aimed one, blade cutting through the air but reaching none of them. Dream is about to switch his Persona to one that has a skill that this Shadow is weak to, but he is stopped by a sudden realization.

He doesn't know what it is.

That moment of pause is enough for the Shadow to lunge at Dream, sword in hand. Dream barely dodges that – a second later and he would have had his throat slit. Techno fires a single bullet, piercing the Shadow's hand and disarming it. The Shadow roars in pain, lashing out at them with a flurry of pink spheres.

Those are no ordinary projectiles. Dream ducks, only for it to sail over his head. Not even a second later, a sharp pain stabs him in the back. Knees buckling, Dream sinks to the ground, hissing.

The pain spreading throughout his lower back disappears when Fundy touches him, swirls of green enveloping the both of them. A fireball slams into the ground a little too close for comfort.

"I've got a plan, but I'm gonna need your help," Techno says, moving to stand beside Dream as Fundy joins Bad's efforts to keep the Shadow at bay.

"My help?"

Techno nods. Dream understands his plan even before he's finished explaining it. It's not a bad

plan, but it would require a lot of precision on Techno's part.

"Fundy, Bad, get back!" Dream shouts.

Bad shoots his final fireball, scowling when it misses the Shadow, smashing into the wall behind it, cards scattering into the air. The Shadow roars again and Dream unsheathes his dagger, unafraid of the pink spheres gathering around it again.

Johanna's engine thunders as soon as the pink spheres are sent forth. Dream rushes into it, eyes focused on only the Shadow ahead. He's got to finish this one off in a single hit.

Techno passes him, ray gun in hand, firing bullets trailing cyan behind them, meeting each and every single one of the Shadow's spheres. The collision of the two seems like fireworks blooming across the night sky, scattering cinders of colour all about.

The Shadow shrieks as Dream pounces on it, dagger raised and plunges it straight into the Shadow's throat. He pulls it out immediately, black blood spraying from the wound and splattering onto his shirt. Dream leaps away as the Shadow struggles for breath, its life ended by a single shot from Techno's gun, bursting into ash.

"Well, now that's over with," Techno says, sheathing his light sabre.

[Fundy](#) patches up their wounds while Bad heads on over to examine the cards on the ground.

"These are membership cards."

"We're going to have to register them, though," Dream says, glancing towards the monitor that had previously shown the other half of their team doing battle. The room is empty – a good sign. Perhaps they're already on their way.

A static sound fills his ears, before Dream hears a voice that could have sunk him to his knees.

"Dream? Are you there?"

"Is that Navi?" Bad raises his head.

"We're in this...this command room," Dream says, doing his best to keep his voice level. "Where are you guys?"

"Just outside the corridor," Navi says. "The door's locked and the cardkey's with you. There aren't any Shadows out here so you don't have to hurry."

Dream is already by the locked door right below the vent they had dropped from, the door that Navi was talking about. He taps the card against the reader and the door opens, revealing the rest of the Thieves on the other side. Somewhat scuffed up but are otherwise unharmed.

"See," Navi says with a half-smile. "We're all good."

Dream laughs and sweeps him into a hug, releasing him quickly when Techno clears his throat.

"These cards," Techno says, holding up a blank card, one of two that has been undamaged from the fight. "Can we use them?"

"I think so," Navi says, walking over to the main computer monitor standing atop the desk. Bad and Techno hand him the cards and Navi registers both cards.

"Okay, so there's this one with John Doe--"

“You have a horrible naming sense,” Sapnap interrupts. Navi shoots him a look.

“And this one’s Perry Fisher.” Navi holds up the second card.

“I think we should use the second one,” Eret says.

“Alright then.” Navi hands the second card over to Dream.

“Let’s get back to that elevator and head on up,” Dream says, pocketing the card. Navi hands the other one to Techno.

“Why are you giving it to me?”

“Get rid of it or something,” Navi says.

“Yeah, it’s the newbie’s job to do the dirty work,” Fundy says with a smirk. Techno shrugs but accepts the card.

Dream heads down the new corridor he hadn’t had a chance to go down earlier. The Shadows have mostly been cleared out, giving the team an easy time as they dash back to the main hallway where the elevator awaits them.

The team squeeze into the elevator car and Dream presses the card against the scanner. After a single beep and a flash of green light, the button to the next floor lights up. Without hesitation, Dream taps it and the elevator begins to move, chugging upwards to the member’s floor.

*

The member’s floor has a totally different feel from the floor below. Ahead lies a short hallway, walls decorated with clashing colours and gewgaws depicting the four suits. At the end of it is a counter manned by a Shadow dressed smartly in a tuxedo.

“What’s this…wavy door?” Techno pokes a finger at the safe room, raising a brow in surprise when the door is nudged open ever so slightly.

“It’s a safe room,” Navi says. “Shadows can’t find us in here.”

“I think we should take a rest now,” Dream says. If he’s being honest, with the tougher Shadows around, he’s quite exhausted. He is met with unanimous agreement, and the Thieves venture into the safe room.

The exterior of the casino is visible from the window that stretches from wall to wall, giving them a clear view of the guards stationed below as well as the police station in the distance. Dream slumps onto a couch and Navi settles beside him, head lolling against the backrest of the couch.

“How many floors are there?” Bad asks, either utterly ignorant of Skeppy playing with his hair or is too used to it by now.

“I don’t know.” Navi draws up his holographic map, swiping from screen to screen. “I think there are…four, including the manager’s level.”

“So now we’re on the second one,” Dream says, resting his head on Navi’s shoulder.

“Yeah, we’re on the member’s floor,” Navi says. “Then there’s the high limit floor above and then the manager’s floor.”

“But there were only three buttons on the elevator,” Eret says.

“There was?”

“One for the main floor, one for this member’s floor and the last is for the high-limit floor,” Techno says.

“But then where’s the manager’s floor?” Fundy asks.

“I think we’ll find out when we get past the high limit floor,” Dream says. “If we see Nick’s mom’s Shadow we can ask her too.”

“I don’t think she’d give us any answers, but it’s worth a shot,” TapL says.

Seeing as the team can barely keep their eyes open, Dream believes it’s best to wrap up the investigation for the day. He rises, wincing as the soles of his feet scream in pain, muscles aching and sore.

There’s a rope ladder by the window in case of emergencies. Techno pushes the bundle off the edge and lets it unroll, hanging from the side of the casino wall. He goes first, followed by Dream, Navi and the rest of the team.

“Okay, I think we did a lot today,” Dream says when they’re gathered back at the entrance. “So, good job everyone. We’re probably going to go back in sometime next week.”

“Sometime next week meaning Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday or Saturday, right?” Techno asks.

“Yeah, we’ll text the group chat,” Fundy says, “so keep your eyes peeled.”

Dream activates the Meta-Nav and they exit the Palace.

“Returning to the real world. Thank you for your hard work.”

*

10/30 – FRIDAY – EVENING

“It looks ugly.”

“No it’s not,” Nick says, frowning down at his new hoodie that he got from that crossword puzzle he was solving the other day. A giant duck is splashed on the front with the word “Quack” in a speech bubble. Not to mention that the hoodie itself is bright yellow.

“Looks like something Darryl or Zak would wear,” Floris says, tail swishing.

A meow at the window draws Clay’s attention and he watches as Ant hops down from the ledge and makes a beeline for its bed, curling up and staring at them. Ant has been taking long walks more frequently now that his paw has mostly healed. Clay just wonders what he’s been up to.

“Hey. Stay still,” Clay says, grabbing his phone and opening the camera app, snapping a photograph of Nick while he does the peace sign. Floris snorts.

Me: Image.png

Darryl: where did you get that

Darryl: I want it

“I told you so,” Floris says, reading over Clay’s shoulder.

Blade: I have one

Blade: do you want it

“Why the fuck does he have one?” Nick says, staring at his phone.

Clay shrugs. Some things are better left unknown.

Darryl: yes

Darryl: can you can bring it to me next time we have a phantom thieves meeting

Blade: ok

Zak: why the fuck do you have one

Zak: and how can I get one

Zak asking the obvious questions here.

Blade: get good at crossword

Blade: and I only have one and darryl asked first

Zak: nick give it to me

Nick: tf? No

Zak: PLEASE I WANT MATCHING OUTFITS WITH DARRYL

Zak: anyway

Zak: guys

Zak: remember our Halloween outing tomorrow

Zak: and blade you’re coming along too

Blade: no

Me: why

Zak: give me ten good reasons

Harvey: everyone will be there and it’ll be so fun

Gina: come on

Gina: it’ll be fun <33

Blade: who are you

George: my sister

George: shes a part of the PT she kinda knows what we do so it's fine

Blade: oh

Blade: im still not going

Me: come on it's a yearly thing after tomorrow there won't be another one till next year

Blade: that's why it's an annual thing

Zak: anyway ive got a haunted house I want to go to

Zak: and I wanna trick or treat

Eret: you actually can't. we're too old

Zak: gina u can trick or treat in my place

George: yeah she can

Zak: share candy with me

Gina: okie

Zak: YES

Eret: so tomorrow at

Zak: Valentine's

Zak: eight p.m.

George: fine by us

Me: okay

Harvey: same

Gina: blade are you coming

There is silence for the longest time.

Blade: maybe

Gina: OKAY SEE YOU THERE

Well, that's an interesting end to that conversation. Clay has secured his own costume when he went out with George the other afternoon. Nick had wanted to match with them – the unoriginal man – and gotten himself a set too.

While Clay *is* looking forward to dressing up tomorrow – he hasn't done so for a long time – he's *not* looking forward to what Zak has in store for them...

tommy in his most recent stream: [Dream's] like the Joker!
me: i don't think we're thinking about the same joker but yes

Dream SMP spoilers (?):

also what the heck is happening on the dream smp dream and puffy grieving bbh's house, tommy risks exile, eret fails to show up to sign fundys adoption papers,
THERES A MEETING ON 2 DEC TO SIGN A TREATY

Test of Courage

Chapter Summary

halloween chap!

Chapter Notes

WARNING: gore, disturbing imagery (?)

Not sure if i even wrote it well but just putting it out there in case

if november had 31 days it would be exactly 1 month since irl halloween

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

10/31 – SATURDAY – DAYTIME

“Hey.” Clay raises a hand in greeting. “You’re early.”

“Is this about what you texted us the other day?”

“Yeah.” Clay nods. “I think now’s as good a time as any to come up with a plan.”

“Wouldn’t want to wait any longer.”

Clay gestures to the menu. “Wanna order something before the others arrive?”

“Nah. I had a filling brunch.”

One by one, the others begin to show up. The others who were called to this meeting, of course. They take their seats around Clay, each of them intrigued by the sudden call of their leader.

“Well then,” Clay says, clasping his fingers in front of him, elbows propped up on the table. “Let’s get this meeting started.”

*

10/31 – SATURDAY – EVENING

“Hey, you look good,” Clay says, eyes fixed on George in his Hogwarts’ robes, the blue-and-black combination suiting him to a T. George ducks his head shyly, fingers playing with his robes.

“You too.”

Gina shoots Nick a side glance. “Don’t you feel awkward now?”

Nick sighs. “Yeah. Man, I didn’t think about the whole couple costume shit.”

“Hey!”

Harvey runs up to them, clad in a turquoise leotard, his sea-blue tiara sitting rather precariously on his head.

“You look like you just did a terrible impression of Skeppy’s costume,” Floris says.

Harvey looks down at himself. “Absolutely not. I would never try to imitate Skeppy-”

“What’s that supposed to mean? My costume is fabulous,” Zak huffs, walking up to them with Darryl in tow, the both of them wearing duck onesies.

“This is Halloween, not a sleepover party.” Floris snorts.

Clays sighs. “Are you just insulting everyone’s costumes now?”

“Because mine is obviously the best. There’s no competition,” Floris says, pawing at the pumpkin costume he’s all dressed up in. It is actually meant for a cat, but Floris seems to be able to fit just fine.

The last to show up are Eret and Blade who look like total opposites, one dressed in a stunning baby pink strawberry dress complete with high heels and one looks like he just went to a fancy dinner with blood on the menu.

“Sorry we’re late,” Eret says, striding over. How he walks so perfectly in those heels amazes Clay. “So, where’s this haunted house of yours, Zak?”

“Not too far. I’ll lead you guys there. I heard it’s pretty scary,” Zak says, holding up ten tickets. Clay shivers. “Okay, guys. Pay up.” He turns to Gina. “Except you. Come on, Gogy. Money for two tickets.”

The Thieves, minus Gina and Darryl, pay Zak the money. They then head out of the station and into the Central Street of Valentine Hills. The decorations have gotten even creepier and more festive at the same time, with cackling witches displayed at storefronts and pumpkins with eerie expressions accentuated by the glowing candles from within. Children rush to and fro, carrying baskets in the shapes of scary creatures and pumpkins, probably filled to the brim with candy.

[“This is](#) the one,” Zak says, pausing in front of a tall building, walls somewhat dilapidated, with a long queue snaking out of the entrance. Most of them seem to be excited teenagers, chatting nonstop about how good they heard the escape room was and how realistic the zombies had been. Clay notices a couple of people in wheelchairs as well as one or two with service dogs.

Clay really does not like to put “realistic” and “zombies” in the same sentence. He glances around. From what he can see, the reception lobby is almost-pitch black, lit only with luminescent gooey substances staining the walls. Cobwebs stick to the ceilings with fake spiders hanging from them. Clay quickly averts his gaze from them.

“You look like you’re having second thoughts,” George says.

Clay scratches his head. “To be honest, yeah.”

“It’s probably worse than Phasmophobia,” Zak points out.

Clay groans.

Since they let in groups of ten at once, it isn’t long before it’s their turn. Zak and Eret do Clay nearly seizes up when he brushes against a plastic spider’s spindly legs. The girl at the reception

isn't looking too healthy either, what with that pallor and ragged dress and bleeding...eyes.

"Through that door..." the girl whispers, a smile creeping up her face, revealing blackened teeth. "I hope you're prepared..."

Oh, Clay is prepared alright. Prepared to get the fuck out of here. He'd like to think that he should bit the tiniest bit braver, to be that guy who laughs in the face of death, the one that George clings to when he's afraid...

Who's he kidding? He's no Dream in the real world.

"Right then," Gina says, pumping a fist, looking *way* too excited for this. "Let's go!"

Clay sucks in a deep breath. George stands beside him, chuckling as they enter through the door. As soon as they're in, the door slams shut behind them, bathing them in darkness.

Not absolute darkness. The gloom is punctuated by the glow of unsettling portraits, their eyes seemingly following their every movement. An owl hoots overhead.

A sharp snapping sound alerts the group to a presence behind him. Clay spins on his heels, only to find nothing, the length of the hallway empty. George's fingers tighten on his wrist. Blade has the most disinterested look on his face and Zak urges them to continue on in a trembling voice.

The next room they come to is a giant dining hall, a long table standing in its middle with food on the t- On closer inspection, that's not food. Horror claws at Clay's insides, glancing away from the human body on the table. It's not real, he tells himself. It's just a plastic model of...of intestines, and lungs...and the blood is nothing but red paint...

"Ooh, there's blood on the floor," Gina says, gesturing to the red stains on the carpet. "Someone's been a messy eater."

"I don't know how you can say that so...cheerfully." Harvey gulps.

The door slams behind them. Good Lord. Someone *wants* to scare the shit out of h-A loud bang has him jumping six feet into the air, eyes wide as he turns around.

"Holy shit!" Zak screeches. Following his gaze, Clay's blood turns to ice as he lays eyes on a ghost girl hovering several inches in the air, arms hanging limply by her sides, dishevelled hair curtaining her face.

"It's just a puppet," Eret says, reaching over to brush the hair out of the marionette's face. Blade scoffs.

That doesn't make it any less creepy.

"Are you okay?" George asks. "You look like you're gonna have a heart attack."

"I'm fine," Clay drawls with a nervous chuckle. "It's all good. I promise you."

"If you say so."

The next room is what looks to be a child's bedroom, headless dolls hanging from the ceiling, clothes shredded.

"Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall..."

Where the fuck did that singing come from? A tinkling giggle reverberates around them.

“Humpty Dumpty had a great fall...”

“Let’s get outta here,” Darryl says in a shaky voice, edging towards the door, totally missing the figure standing in the crib dripping blood from her mouth, peering at them with pitch-black eyes and a teasing grin.

“All the king’s horses and all the king’s men...”

“Move, move, move!” Clay yells and drags a guffawing George with him. He pushes past Zak, out of the room and into the next, ignoring Gina’s piercing shrieks of laughter.

What Clay didn’t expect in the next room, almost bumping into the wheelchair lift and diving down a couple of steps, is to wind up in a basement filled with rotting corpses. Not actual rotting corpses but the sight alone is enough to send chills down his spine.

What he wouldn’t do to be able to summon Atropos, Daisoujou or, like, Unicorn right now, to rip off his mask to call forth the power of his heart. As the first figure rises, shaggy hair falling past his shoulders and groaning with the most baritone voice that reminds Clay of Blade’s, Clay knows he’s in for a terribly long night.

*

[I hate](#) haunted houses.”

“Here.” George hands Clay a crepe with a cute ghost stuck into the pistachio ice cream. Instantly grateful, Clay takes a tentative lick. Currently resting on a bench with George and Floris, Clay wills his heart to stop its erratic pounding.

The rest of the Thieves have scattered, with Gina, Eret, Harvey and surprisingly Blade sitting at a café, confectionaries in the shape of bats, black cats and pumpkins spread out in front of them. Nick, Zak and Darryl are inquiring about some escape room that seems to be quite popular, but Clay is surely going to sit that one out.

“If you want to we could just walk around while they’re doing the escape room,” George says.

“Do you want to do it?”

“Not particularly,” George admits. “Those zombies were...” He laughs suddenly. “Well, that guy was pretty nice.”

“Don’t remind me.” Clay licks sulkily at his ice cream. He’d tripped as he was attempting to escape the basement of zombies, grabbed some guy’s torn cloak as he falls and completely ripped it apart. It was the most mortifying thing he’s done in a long time and that’s saying a lot. He’d apologized profusely to the actor who’d taken it in good stride while another actress laughed uncontrollably.

“It was funny.” Yeah, the Phantom Thieves had been entertained for the rest of the haunted house.

“I was scared out of my wits.”

“Understandable.”

“Hey, guys. It’s fifteen dollars per person. It’s the student price after their Halloween discount,”

Zak says, bounding over with Darryl and Nick.

“No thanks,” Clay says, munching on the white chocolate ghost. Nick snickers.

“What? Too scared?” Nick grins.

“If he doesn’t want to, we shouldn’t force him,” Darryl chides.

“I don’t think I’m going too,” George says. “We’ll just walk around for a bit and chill.”

“Alright then. I don’t think Blade wants to go to an escape room either,” Zak says, looking over at the foursome seated at the table.

“He might,” Floris says. “He’s big on showing off these kinds of things.”

As it turns out, Clay and George are the only ones sitting out of this. The rest of the group marches on to the escape room advertising mad scientists and mutant beasts which Clay wants no part of. Not for tonight, at least.

Walking about with George, doing a bit of window-shopping...honestly isn’t too bad a way to spend his only Halloween here in Fariold. It makes him a little wistful, even, thinking about the laughs and tears he's gone through with his friends, the Phantom Thieves, even when their futures are at stake. As the deadline draws just a little nearer, Clay can't help but quash down a pang in his heart, at the thought of the inevitable end of these peaceful times...

*

Chapter End Notes

fool arcana rank 5 -> 6 (phantom thieves)

the haunted house is inspired by several:

- Terror Manor
- Frolic Haunt
- that haunted house from EXO Showtime
- my own experience at my school's funfair (first and last time in a haunted house)
- tubbo and niki's halloween stream's haunted house map
- pokemon diamond/pearl/platinum's old chateau

In the Midst of Autumn and Winter

Chapter Summary

s links

Chapter Notes

Imao we're finally starting the late-game s link - tapl's

don't think my chapter transitions are really good this time round...i apologize in advance if the scenes don't feel up to standard...

im gonna be super busy tomorrow thank god its an infiltration chapter since i usually spend less time on those

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

11/1 – SUNDAY – DAYTIME

“Wow, you run fast,” Harvey says, plopping down on a bench, both himself and Clay covered in perspiration. The bench overlooks the lake in the middle of Helen Park, several boats floating out to sea.

“I run with Nick sometimes.”

“I see.” Harvey takes a swig out of his water bottle. “Hey, can I ask you something?”

“Sure. What is it?” Clay already has an idea of what Harvey wants to ask.

“If the Black Mask hadn’t interfered, do you think my father could have...could have atoned for what he did? He would have had a changed heart, right?”

“Yeah, I should think so,” Clay says. “We did steal his Treasure and all.”

Harvey sighs, breathing forcefully through his nostrils. Clay knows he’s still thinking about it, memories of that fateful night haunting him like a persistent ghost.

“Why did the Black Mask do what he did, Clay?” Harvey asks, eyes glassy. “My father did...he did do some wrong, but that doesn’t mean that he should have died.”

Clay presses his lips together. Even now, when he knows the Black Mask’s identity, he cannot quite understand why he would do such a thing. What exactly was his motive?

“Your father shouldn’t have died,” Clay agrees. “And we’re going to make sure there won’t be any more people like him.”

Harvey dips his head.

“If you’ve got any troubles, you can talk to me, you know,” Clay says. “I’ll be here for you.”

Harvey flashes him a grin, and Clay can feel a faint bond forming between them.

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast acquired a new vow. It shall become the wings of rebellion that breaketh thy chains of captivity. With the birth of the Strength Persona, I have obtained the winds of blessing that shall lead to freedom and new power...

“I’m managing for now,” Harvey says, scratching his head. “Though the company’s a little...well, I’ll see how it goes.”

They part ways at the train station and Clay heads straight home.

*

11/1 – SUNDAY – EVENING

Clay is roused from his afternoon nap by a weight leaping onto his chest. He coughs, about to hurl some expletives at Floris when he realizes that the blue beady eyes staring into his does not belong to that damn fox.

Ant wastes no time in tugging on Clay’s sleeve, dragging him out of that cosy blanket of his. Clay rubs the sleep from his eyes, shivering at the sudden bout of cold that assaults him as soon as the soles of his feet are pressed flat against the freezing floor.

If Ant is this panicked, it must be urgent. Clay asks no questions – not that Ant can answer him anyway – and pulls on his hoodie. Both of Nick’s parents are locked up in their shared office, and Nick himself is missing from the house – probably out for an evening jog.

Clay slips into his trainers and jogs in the direction Ant’s leading him, the latter bounding frantically down the sidewalk, deft paws carrying him forward as fast as they can.

Clay smells it before he even sees it. The coppery scent of blood that he is all too familiar with. Turning the corner at the end of the street, Clay lays eyes on a figure on the ground who appears to be a young boy, limbs splayed, head laying in a dark pool.

Oh God. What could have happened? No, there’s no time to think about that. He needs to get the boy to the hospital immediately. On closer inspection, Clay recognizes him as the boy he’d met at the graveyard the other day, the boy who had demeaned Ant. Timothy was his name, Clay thinks.

Ant stays by the boy’s side as Clay phones the ambulance. Despite what the boy had said to it, and about it, Ant has still displayed the utmost kindness. The ambulance shows up a few minutes later, and soon the boy is within the paramedics’ care.

One of the paramedics thanks Clay before the vehicle speeds off, the area now contained by the police. It must have been a hit-and-run, from the looks of it. Clay just hopes that the boy would get better soon.

Ant’s ears droop, body still tense as it trails behind Clay. Clay can hardly hope to understand its pain, understand what it is thinking of at this very moment in time. Guilt? Worry?

Clay bends down and scoops Ant into his arms. The cat does not resist as it nestles into Clay’s chest, purring softly. It closes its eyes, body relaxing ever so slightly.

Clay makes a mental note to check up on that boy soon.

*

11/2 – MONDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“I’d like to thank you.”

“Thank me?” Clay asks, stabbing his fork into his chocolate cake. “For what?”

“For helping me with Adrian and Zak,” Darryl says. “You know, about helping me realize that I was trying to choose one over the other.”

“It’s no problem.”

“But you’ve taught me that you can’t just rank people like one, two, three,” Darryl says, sipping at his smoothie. “Life’s not that simple.”

“Well, hardly anything is.”

“Yeah, but life especially. And people,” Darryl says with a shrug. “So, to thank you, I got you this.”

Darryl fishes a keychain in the shape of a muffin from his pocket and hands it over to Clay. With the press of a button, it glows as well. An LED keychain. In the shape of a muffin. Clay loves it.

“Meeting you guys, the Phantom Thieves...If I hadn’t met you guys, then I would probably still be under Krones’ thumb and everything, and I wouldn’t be as strong as I am now.” Darryl dabs at the corner of his mouth with a napkin. “For the sake of the Thieves, I’m gonna continue to improve myself and I want you to see the best of me at the end of it.”

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast turned a vow into a blood oath. Thy bond shall become the wings of rebellion and break the yoke of thy heart. Thou has awakened to the ultimate secret of the Lovers, granting thee infinite power...

Just like with Nick, Clay can see a faint shape hovering over Darryl. It’s not Carmen, but another slender figure, chains whipping about at the end of her clawed hands, three piercing yellow eyes staring back at him. Hecate disappears with a sharp cry, a sphere of red melding with Darryl’s soul.

“I’m counting on you,” Clay says, nodding with approval. Darryl flashes him a grin.

They finish up their cakes before Clay sends Darryl off at the train station. He dives back into the growing crowd, headed straight for his next appointment.

*

11/2 – MONDAY – EVENING

Clay sits at a bench as he watches Justine and Caroline swing up and down on the Viking ship. Caroline looks like she’s having the time of her life while Justine is clinging onto the metal bar like her life depends on it.

He still can’t believe he spent nearly seventy bucks for tickets to Destinyland for a half-day trip. The worst part was that he probably isn’t even going to ride anything. Then again, seventy bucks is nothing when he’s got a few million dollars sitting somewhere in his and Nick’s room. The Metaverse is a powerful thing.

“Fun?” Clay asks, rising and walking over to them. Caroline struts over while Justine staggers, the

latter looking a little green in the face.

“It was okay,” Caroline huffs, as if Clay didn’t just watch her scream her lungs out in pure joy.

“It is nothing I can’t handle,” Justine says, as if Clay didn’t just watch her scream her lungs out in pure terror.

“Are you not getting on any, inmate?” Caroline folds her arms, foot tapping expectantly.

“I would if I had someone to ride with,” Clay says, shrugging. He somewhat expected Justine and Caroline to complain and force him to get on the tallest roller coaster in this park (which he would turn down without hesitation) but their attention is immediately diverted when the mascot of Destinyland bumbles by, handing out balloons to young children.

Needless to say, the twins come back with matching balloons that bump against Clay’s face whenever he tries to walk beside them, never mind the fact that they like to sandwich him.

They stay until the closing time, just after the fireworks display, and for a split second, Clay is whisked back to the time when he and the rest of the team had been seated at one of these overpriced restaurants, watching that livestream of Andre Lee’s confession and the tragedy that followed after. That brief flashback summons memories that he wants sealed away deep in the recesses of his mind. Clay shuts his eyes to force them out of his head.

“What do humans gain out of these rides?” Justine asks suddenly. “Apart from temporary amusement and thrill, one does not seem to benefit greatly in other aspects.”

“Maybe because it’s hard to find thrill in daily life,” Clay says. “Sometimes, people live through life all mundane and everything, you know.”

“Mundane?” Caroline looks thoughtful. “So you come here to find excitement?”

“Pretty much. Though I’d rather not get on those higher ones,” Clay says, glancing back at the impressive skeleton of the roller coaster tracks that stretch almost boundlessly, running like a snake above the park.

“Then why do you come here, inmate?” Caroline asks. “Don’t you have enough excitement fighting Shadows already?”

Clay bites his lip. “I think it has something to do with the fact that this is a...a safe type of excitement. Like, it’s generally safe, anyway. There are precautions and everything.”

“So while humans would like a sense of danger, or excitement, as you put it,” Justine says slowly, “they’d also prefer to feel safe at the same time.”

“It sounds weird when you put it that way, but yeah. Something along those lines.”

“I see,” Justine says. “Humans truly are contradictory beings.”

“That’s what makes humans...humans,” Clay says.

Justine hums, checking something off her clipboard. “We have almost completed our checklist, inmate. Now we are simply left with one more request on this list.”

“Next time, then,” Clay says, stifling a yawn.

They stay until the closing time, just after the fireworks display, and for a split second, Clay is

whisked back to the time when he and the rest of the team had been seated at one of these overpriced restaurants, watching that livestream of Andre Lee's confession and the tragedy that followed after. That brief flashback summons memories that he wants sealed away deep in the recesses of his mind. Clay shuts his eyes to force them out of his head.

The sun has already set ages ago, and it's nearly ten. Several people are still milling about the entrance to Destinyland, though most are on their way back to the train station. Clay escorts the twins back to the Velvet Room before heading back home and hoping to get a good night's sleep.

*

11/3 – TUESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

"Alright, I think I'm just about done," Dr Montgomery says, looking especially chipper now, placing her clipboard down on the table. Clay crunches on the last of his Chocapic cereal before hurling the box into the trash can.

"Now that I think about it, I never did tell you about what really happened to Patricia," Dr Montgomery says with a wistful look on her face

Patricia? Clay furrows his brows as he tries to remember who she's referring to. Ah, she must be the friend that Dr Montgomery and her colleague had been discussing at the buffet previously.

"She was a very good friend of mine. Always very bubbly. Never let anything get her down." Dr Montgomery stares into the distance, a faraway look in her eyes. "One day, a burglar broke into her house and...her parents died during that incident. Right in front of her eyes."

Clay's heart drops.

"She couldn't speak afterwards and was depressed as a result. I did all I could to help her, but..." Dr Montgomery sighs. She turns back to Clay, determination blazing like the hottest of flames behind those eyes. "I swore to find a way, by hook or by crook, to ease her pain."

The way she said that sent shivers down Clay's spine. That resolve, that passionate spirit, driven by sorrow and pain. It touches Clay's heart, like slithering tendrils of warmth wrapping around his being. She said it in such a way that makes him want to believe her...no, that makes him *believe* that she can come up with a way, no matter how impossible it may seem.

"Sorry about that," Dr Montgomery says, laughing and shaking her head, eyes shining. "It's just... you're someone I feel like I can open up to, you know. For someone who's helped me a lot, I think you deserve happiness too."

Clay dips his head, flushing. "T-Thanks." Why did that sound so ominous for a moment there? Like there's a Shadow lingering behind her? In any case, that hint of darkness disappears as soon as it had appeared. Perhaps it had been a trick of the light, a hallucination brought on by his repeated trips into the Metaverse for...slightly more than half a year now.

"Oh, right. I will be leaving this school by November eighteenth," Dr Montgomery says. "After that, I would likely be devoting most of my time to my research, so I don't think we will be able to meet very often anymore."

Clay nods and nicks a box of Cheerios which he stuffs into his bag. He leaves the room after thanking her, walking out into an empty hallway. November the eighteenth, hm?

Two days before they are to carry out the plan.

"I think you deserve happiness too."

Those words ring out in his head. The plan, and happiness. Two conflicting ideas battling for dominance. Clay doesn't know what to think, his legs moving on autopilot as he makes his way down the deserted street, the rustling of leaves blown along the road and Floris' quiet breathing his only company.

*

11/3 – TUESDAY – EVENING

"What the hell am I doing here?" Clay wonders aloud. He sighs as he settles back into a hard, wooden bench. Floris squints at the pitching machine a fair distance away.

"I've wanted to try it for a long time now," Nick says, grasping the baseball bat in his hands, testing its weight. "Neil and I agreed to come here one day but, well, we never did."

Clay watches as Nick steps up to the batting station, bat in hand.

"You ever played?" Clay asks.

"Nope."

"I think he's gonna get punched in the gut. Just watch him." Floris has the most devilish look on his face that gives Clay the shudders.

"I heard that!"

The first ball comes lightning fast from the machine, but Nick's bat meets that ball easily, smashing it high and far. Clay leans back, fingers twined behind his head as he watches Nick take on ball after ball with a resounding smack each time.

He can almost see Nick's clothes change into that of his Phantom Thief outfit, cudgel in hand, sending enemy projectiles back to the Shadow that fired them. The Metaverse has changed them a lot. If someone asked him where he'd be in a year's time last year, Clay would never have guessed that he'd have been banished to the city and subsequently awakened to supernatural powers that grants him the ability to change people's hearts.

Fate is a strange thing indeed.

Clay isn't sure if Nick's points are considered high, but he's managed to hit each ball nearly to the end of the room. He and Nick swap places, the baseball bat heavy in Clay's hands. How did Nick carry this so effortlessly just now?

Clay steels himself – he's never played baseball before; soccer was more his thing – eyes narrowed, body tensed, hyper-focused on the rattling machine.

The first ball is fired, a speedy sphere whizzing through the air. It's as if Clay is seeing it in slow motion, the ball glowing just the faintest hint of blue. He smacks the ball as hard as he can, the resonating thwack sharp in his ear. The ball goes flying in a smooth arc before landing on the ground further than Clay expected it to.

Four more balls later and their scores are displayed on the scoreboard, with Clay losing to Nick by just a smidge.

“It’s getting late,” Floris says. “And I think your mom’s coming back tonight, Nick.”

The trio leave the batting cages, satisfied with their performance, and heads for home.

*

11/4 – WEDNESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“I’ve drafted up a plan for what I’d like to do to gather students’ concerns,” Eret says. “Would you care to read it?”

“That’s what I’m here for.”

Eret shifts his laptop such that the screen is facing Clay, depicted on the screen a Word document with several paragraphs typed out.

Open a Student Feedback form both in hardcopy and online that one can submit either with a name or anonymously. Concerns regarding current Student Council initiatives can be raised or suggestions can be made on possible improvements.

Allow some time a week if students would like to discuss certain matters with the Student Council members with a sign-up sheet posted up outside the Student Council Room, library and the cafeteria – places that students would be able to access easily. That way, students would be able to speak directly with the Student Council themselves if they’d like to talk in person.

“I’m starting out small,” Eret says, “then based on the response, I’d like to see how I can improve on this.”

“Have you asked the other Council members yet?”

Eret shakes his head. “I wanted to hear what you think about it first.”

Clay gives the plan another once-over. “It should be fine. I think a lot of people can benefit from this, actually.”

“What I’ve learnt is that sometimes people suffer silently and wouldn’t dare to speak up, which is why Krones was able to exert so much influence in the first place,” Eret says, sighing and looking away, guilt written all over his face. “I hope that the students would be able to open up to someone that wouldn’t judge them for their problems.”

“Most importantly, they’d feel safe,” Clay finishes.

“Yeah.” Eret turns the laptop back such that the screen is facing him. “I’m going to discuss this with the other Council members first. Next Monday.”

It’s heartening to see Eret taking the time to come up with such ideas to help the student body. Several people pop into his head – Darryl, Tubbo, Niki and more; they are people who fit the bill exactly: people who needed help but were unable to speak up about it or receive the help they required. With these new initiatives that can even be passed down to the next generation of student leaders, Clay hopes that it would give the next few cohorts a safe space to talk about their problems, without fear of rebuttal or being shut down.

Eret decides to remain at school for a little while longer to sort out his college applications and Clay prepares to leave.

“We’re going in on Friday, correct?” Eret asks.

“Yeah,” Clay says, glancing back with one foot out the door already. “The deadline’s on the twentieth of November, so we need to send the calling card out on the nineteenth. I’d prefer to finish it earlier rather than later.”

Eret nods. “A good practice. I’ll see you in school tomorrow, Clay.”

Clay raises a hand in greeting and heads out. The sun is setting, casting golden hues against the pink skies and clouds. They’re having roast chicken tonight and Clay is totally down for that, especially since Mr Armstrong makes a mean roast chicken. The crispy honey-brown skin and the tenderness of the meat...oh *God* he can already *taste* it in his mouth...

“Hey, watch where you’re going,” Floris hisses, and Clay deftly sidesteps an incoming cyclist like it’s second nature to him.

Ooh, he can’t *wait* for the roast chicken...

*

11/4 – WEDNESDAY – EVENING

“Seriously?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Clay knew he shouldn’t have pulled this book out in front of Floris.

“‘How To Be A Casanova’,” Floris reads.

“I’m looking up potential date ideas.” Clay scowls as he turns away from Floris, pulling the blanket away from him. “Don’t judge me.”

Floris yelps as he’s suddenly exposed to the cold and wriggles back under the duvet.

“You do you, I guess,” Floris says, resting his head against Clay’s pillow.

Clay finishes the book around midnight, making a mental note to himself to return the book to the library tomorrow. He places it on the shelf and curls under the duvet. Listening to the rhythmic typing of Nick’s keyboard and the frantic clicking of his mouse, Clay soon surrenders to slumber.

*

11/5 – THURSDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“This is for you.”

Niki drops a packet of seeds for yellow roses into Clay’s hand. Clay turns it around, inspecting it.

“Uh...thanks? But what’s it for?”

“For helping me with my troubles when I had no one else to turn to,” Niki says with a bright smile. “If it weren’t for you stepping in, I don’t think I would have been able to break free from both my mother and Derek.”

“I didn’t do much, though,” Clay says.

“Sure you did. You changed their hearts, didn’t you?” Niki says, the smile never leaving her face.

Clay straightens his shoulders. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, don’t be shy,” Niki says with a giggle. “I did post about Derek on the Phan-Site, but as for my mother’s alcoholism, you were the only one I told about, and right after that, she changed. You must have had something to do with it.”

“I, uh...well...” Clay is rendered speechless, shuffling uncomfortably.

“I won’t tell,” Niki says. “You guys are wanted right now, and I’m not going to betray someone who’s shown me so much kindness.”

Clay nods gratefully. Even though he’s helped Niki get back on her feet and to repair her relationship with her mother, she’s still the one who weathered the damage and endured the entire ordeal. She’s strong in her own right and she will continue to be to stand against all odds. Of that, Clay is certain.

They garden as per usual and Clay leaves once the sun sinks beneath the skyline. He waves goodbye to Niki, hoists his bag onto his shoulder and heads out into the chilly autumn air.

*

11/5 – THURSDAY – LATE NIGHT

“Oi. You okay?”

Floris wakes up with a breathless pant, tail curled closer to his body. The room is dark save for the squares of moonlight from the window.

“I’m...I’m fine,” Floris huffs. Clay doesn’t believe that one bit.

“You wanna talk about it? Seems like you’ve been getting a lot of nightmares these past few days.”

“I said I’m fine,” Floris says, only loud enough for Clay to hear him. Nick snores peacefully on the bottom bunk, utterly dead to the world. Clay gives him a few more seconds, only for Floris to sigh dejectedly.

“I’m not sure if I’m a human anymore,” Floris says quietly. “All the dreams I’m having suggest – very strongly – that I’m...I’m not.”

“They’re just that,” Clay says. “Dreams.”

“Yeah, but there must be a reason I’m having these dreams, right? Dreams are your brain sorting out information and shit,” Floris says with another long, painful sigh. “Isn’t this conversation weird for you?”

Clay squints, confused. “Why?”

“We’re talking about dreams.”

Clay snorts. Floris laughs and curls back in on himself beneath the duvet. Well, if Floris doesn’t want to talk about it, Clay isn’t one to force him. He’d wait till Floris is ready.

Even if he has to wait forever, he wants Floris to know that he will have someone willing to listen.

Chapter End Notes

Strength arcana rank 0 -> 1 (tapL)

Devil arcana rank 7 -> 8 (AntF.)

Lovers arcana rank 9 -> 10 MAX (BBH)

Aeon arcana rank 7 -> 8 (Justine & Caroline)

Councillor arcana rank 8 -> 9 (Montgomery)

Proficiency +5 (batting cages)

Emperor arcana rank 7 -> 8 (eret)

Charm +5 (read book)

Hanged man arcana rank 9 -> 10 MAX (niki)

Fortune arcana rank 8 -> 9 (fundy)

When deciding what snack Dream was gonna eat for dr montgomery's social link scene i nearly wrote koko krunch or honey stars before wondering whether they have those in america

Casino of Envy: Infiltration Middle

Chapter Summary

the dice game and slot machines :DDD

Chapter Notes

omg i was procrastinating writing this hahahah im sleepy seriously i woke up at 6am so my parents can drag me on a 2 hour walk on a treetop boardwalk...

dream smp spoilers:

"as long as i can't be the next schlatt, you can't be the next wilbur."

this hit hard

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

11/5 – FRIDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

Dream edges the door open, wincing as it swings with a creak. There are no Shadows in sight, but the floor is crowded with cognitive beings, each one dressed to the nines with fancy cocktails in hand. None of them even seem to have noticed the Thieves as they rush past them, headed towards the counter at the end which a pleasant Shadow seems to be manning.

“Welcome to the Member’s Floor,” the Shadow says with a lilt in his voice. “First of all, please accept these.” He hands them a small sack held together with string. Dream peers into the sack, finding a mountain of casino tokens, their lime green outline hard on the eyes.

“Tokens?”

“A gift from the owner,” the Shadow says. “These are mere pieces of plastic, however. The true total has been added to your cards.”

“Cards? We have more than one?” Bad glances a round.

“The other one’s still with me,” Techno says, shrugging.

“Each card is given a thousand tokens to start with,” the Shadow says. “To reach the next floor, you will require fifty thousand tokens in total to purchase a High Limit card..”

"Fifty thousand tokens!" Skeppy's eyes bulge.

"Yes," the Shadow says, nodding. "While it may not be enough, it would certainly help you to know that you can borrow tokens from the casino up to the current total of your card."

"What the hell? I don't wanna owe money to a...a casino in my mom's head!" Sapnap cries. "That's plain weird!"

"A High Limit card?" Navi muses.

"That must be where all the high-risk, high-reward games are played," Eret says.

"Indeed." The Shadow chuckles. "There are two games on this floor that you may play: the Dice Game and the Slot Machines. For newcomers, I would suggest the Dice Game."

The Dice Game, huh? The door to that chamber lies to their left, where, presumably, the croupiers and other customers will be. To their right is the chamber leading to the Slot Machines. If that's what the Shadow recommends, then the team has got to play their game.

Eret approaches the plaque affixed to the wall beside the door, explaining the rules of the game. At each table, the customer would have to roll three dice, but before doing so, have to guess whether its total would fall between three to ten or between eleven to eighteen. A correct prediction would double their bet, while three matching dice will triple it. If they get three matching sixes, then they will receive a payout quintuple of their initial bet. The buy-in for the game is twenty-five casino tokens, which the team has plenty of.

"Let's go in and check it out," TapL says, pushing the door open. It leads to another extravagantly-decorated hall housing several rooms. The croupiers, Shadows with sinister crimson eyes, stand behind the tables overseeing the games while the clacking of dice ring in their ears like an annoying ostinato.

"So, we're going to have to play at one of these tables?" Dream folds his arms, cocking his head.

"Seems that way," Bad says uncertainly. "I've never gambled before..."

"We're all minors," Eret agrees.

"Before we begin," Techno says, "I'd like to say something."

Fundy raises a brow. "What is it?"

"You know how this entire place is supposedly under the Palace ruler's command?" Techno says, casting a wary glance at the Shadow croupiers. "Do you think she'd let us play fair games?"

"So what you're trying to say is that she's going to cheat?" Skeppy asks.

"Probably."

"The whole thing's just a gamble to her," Dream says. "Her Shadow form, at least."

"There's a chance she won't, right?" Sapnap asks hopefully. "Like, my mom's not that bad."

"I wouldn't take the risk," Techno says, shrugging.

"Considering her current state of mind, I wouldn't put it past her." Eret folds his arms.

"Why not we play a round or two? Then we can see if the Shadows are really cheating," Bad suggests.

Dream purses his lips. They need a total of fifty thousand tokens to buy the High Limit card and spending even a single token from their thousand-token stash is quite a high price to pay. Especially if Techno is right and they'd get cheated out of their twenty-five tokens immediately.

"I'm against this, just so you know," Fundy says. "I don't think she's gonna play fair."

Now his Thieves are divided.

Navi draws up his holographic map. "If she's cheating, then there must be some way she's doing it, right?" He stabs a finger at a spot on his map. "There's a command room over here in the staff area."

Said staff area is through a door at the end of the lobby they are currently in, and the room Navi is pointing at is a suspicious-looking room past a maze of corridors, two red dots blinking in its centre. Those must be Shadows.

"Let's try going there first and see what we can find," Dream says.

Sapnap grumbles but doesn't argue any further. Dream leads the team towards a metal door, a sign with the words "Authorised Personnel Only" mounted on it. Without hesitation, he nudges it open, keeping his eyes peeled for any patrolling Shadows. When he sees none, he leads his team into the dreary hallways.

Finding their way to the suspicious room is not as simple as Navi's map made it out to be when they're running and hiding from Shadows, backs pressed flush against walls, hands always on the grip of their weapons, voices ready to call on their Personas whenever they need to.

"There. That guy. Mr Black, was it? He's been winning a lot. Make sure he loses the next round."

Dream peeks into the room. The voice belongs to a Shadow who is accompanied by a partner, exactly like what Navi's map had shown. Together, they are seated in front of a control panel and several monitors, claws on a keyboard, tapping away.

"I think you can take them on," Navi whispers. "They don't seem that strong."

Still, no matter the Shadow's strength, one wrong move can severely hurt them. Assembling a team consisting of Fundy, Sapnap and Techno, Dream draws his pistol.

A single shot pierces the back of the lesser-looking Shadow and it bursts into a cloud of ash. The stronger one, a red aura flaring from its body, whirls around to face them.

"Who are you?" the Shadow shrieks, and doesn't even give them a chance to respond as it melts into a puddle of black goo, rising up to form an intimidating figure, a puppet dancing from its fingers. Its face is nothing more than a skull with eyes, partially obscured by its blood-red hoodie. It sways to an inaudible melody as it regards them with a permanent condescending smile.

"This one is Nebiros! It's weak to Garu and Kou skills!"

Dream summons Ose, barely managing to deflect one of Nebiros' orbs of darkness which crashes into the ground. Sapnap bats one of the balls back to Nebiros, the Shadow swiping it away with its claw, laughing ever so patronizingly.

"Don't use Ei or Psi!"

Fundy launches wind blades from above, numerous green shuriken slicing the air, which Nebiros

dodges gracefully. The wind blades slam into the ground and the wall, as if a magical forcefield has directed their path away from their foe. Did he just...?

“What’s wrong?” Nebiros asks, standing completely still, hoarse voice muffled by the chittering of converging lesser Shadows. “For Thieves who’ve bested Palace after Palace, you sure are weak!”

Dream fires a bullet at it, but Nebiros needs merely a finger to throw up a shield with an orangey tint, the bullet reflected back at Dream.

“It’s using Makarakarn and Tetrakarn,” Navi says, Necronomicon hovering over Dream’s head. “But it can’t use one while it’s using the other. In that case...”

Dream summons Atropos. “Techno!”

Techno is already on it, kicking a leg over Johanna, engine roaring, headed straight for Nebiros, wheels screeching against the concrete floor.

Nebiros laughs, firing a beam of black from its fingertip. Dream summons Hell Biker, countering its beam with a blazing stream of fire. Fundy ducks beneath the warring elements and conjures a raging cyclone. Nebiros cackles, drawing a magic barrier, bouncing the cyclone away from itself.

Dream grins as Techno raises his gun and a deafening bang rips through the room, black blood spurting from bullet-shaped hole in Nebiros’ forehead. Its shocked expression is priceless as it stumbles forth, vanishing into naught but a cloud of dust.

[The](#) other Thieves wrap up their battles as well and join Dream at the control panel. It has been partially destroyed by Fundy’s attacks. Does that mean that the dice throw would be fair at some tables?

“I’m going to set the probabilities back to...their...normal probabilities,” Navi says.

“Wait,” Techno places a hand on the counter. “Let’s not.”

“Huh?” Skeppy looks confused.

“If they were planning on cheating us, then it’s fair that we cheat too,” Techno says as a matter-of-factly. “Let’s change the probabilities of the dice such that we’ll win every single game.”

Techno’s more devious than Dream gave him credit for. Still, it’s a good plan. They’re not playing by the rules but then again, neither did Shadow Armstrong. Navi fiddles with the control panel, a series of numbers and symbols popping out from the screen.

“I’ve changed one table,” Navi says. “It should be the one in the middle. No matter what option we choose, we’ll get the maximum payout.”

“Alright then,” Dream says, turning back to his team. “Let’s go back and check it out.”

*

“Welcome to the Dice Game,” the croupier Shadow says pleasantly, hiding very well any hint of malicious intent. “Is this your first time here? I can gladly explain the rules if you wish.”

“No, I’m good,” Dream says, reaching into his sack and pouring out a number of tokens. Navi swiftly counts twenty-five and tosses the rest back. The croupier Shadow smiles.

“Today we’re running a Grand Raise promotion,” the Shadow says. “Both the buy-in and payout

are five times the normal amount, but each customer is limited to four plays.”

Four plays, hmm? That’s plenty, considering what they did back at that control room... “That’s fine by me.”

Navi empties out another hundred tokens with TapL’s help, the mountain of tokens clattering onto the table.

“What will your guess be?” she asks sweetly, almost seductively, her hand hovering over a giant button.

“Between three and ten.”

“Very well.” The Shadow taps the button and three multicoloured dice pop out from a dispenser, clacking as they land on the table. Dream bites the insides of his cheek to keep from showing even the smallest signs of mirth, or their jig may be up.

“Triple sixes!” the Shadow’s lashes flutter. “The payout, as promised, is six-hundred and twenty-five tokens!”

“The total’s been added to the card,” Navi says, a screen drawn up in front of him depicting a number. Their total is now two thousand tokens.

“Would you like to continue playing? You have three plays left.”

Dream nods. “Of course.”

The next three rounds go as Navi had ensured it would – all three dice would be rolled, and all three dice would show a six. No matter what Dream guesses, he’d receive the maximum payout possible. By the end of it, the Shadow has become very flustered, the tremble in her voice unmistakable as Dream leaves the room, utterly satisfied. That could not have gone any better.

Despite their apparent victory in the Dice Game scene, they are still lacking a good number of tokens – three-thousand-and-five-hundred is definitely many thousand tokens shy of fifty thousand. It’s time to move on to the Slot Machines...

“I have an idea,” Techno says. He whips out the other card, the one with John Doe’s name. “I’ll be back with more tokens.”

The Thieves watch as he leaves, accompanied by Eret, back to the Dice Game chamber. Is Techno planning on doing what Dream thinks he’s going to do? Meanwhile, the rest of the lot settle down on the couches in front of the elevator, waiting for the duo to return.

They don’t take long, and when they do come back, they’re three thousand tokens richer, their grand total amounting to six-thousand-and-five-hundred. It’s not much, but it’s something. Who knows? They may just need those extra three thousand tokens.

“Right then. Is everyone ready?”

“Gimme a moment,” TapL says, cleaning the last bit of black blood from his axe. Once he’s done, the Thieves head on towards the next chamber, that of the Slot Machines.

*

“Bet as many tokens as you like up to fifty by inserting them into the slot machine. Then, pull the

lever to try to line up your desired symbols in the centre row,” Bad reads. “So the bet is higher, but the payout is also probably higher.”

“Yeah, seems that way,” Dream says. He pushes open the door to the chamber and is immediately greeted with tons of rows of slot machines, most spaces occupied by cognitive beings staring intently at the blur of the slots as symbols and colours fly by. It makes Dream’s head spin.

“I think we should head over to the back,” Techno says. “The slot machines with the biggest payouts are usually there.”

“I see something really big over there too,” Fundy says. “Like, a giant slot machine.”

They decide to dash past the murmuring cognitive beings, ignoring the hypnotizing spin of the slot machines as they make their way to the back. There are hardly any Shadows around and it’s easy to avoid detection anyway when all they have to do is to bend low enough to hide behind the rows of slot machines till the danger’s passed.

The slot machine that Fundy had mentioned towers over them, with a giant sign that reads: PAY 5000 TOKENS TO WIN 50000!

“Are you serious? We could have just come here straight!” Skeppy looks like he’s about to faint.

“We only had two thousand between the two cards,” Bad points out. “We wouldn’t have had enough to pay the machine.”

“Looks like it only accepts cards,” Sapnap says, inspecting the slot where one is supposed to insert tokens, yet this one is slim enough to fit only their member’s cards. “Makes sense. I wouldn’t want to be counting five thousand tokens.”

“So, all cherries gets us five thousand, so we’d make a net profit of zero tokens there even if we were to win. The expected value of our winnings would be in the negative,” Eret says. “And BAR gives us ten thousand...if we assume that there are seven symbols, then each symbol would have a one-seventh of a chance of appearing...”

“Who the fuck cares,” Fundy cries, pointing to the flashiest symbol displayed on the slot machine’s screen. A giant, red seven. “As long as we match that, we’re going to win fifty thousand tokens!”

“What are we waiting for?” Navi says, approaching the machine. “Dream, where’s the card?”

“We shouldn’t rush into things,” Techno says, clearing his throat. “The Dice Game was rigged. Who’s to say this one isn’t too?”

Oh. Now that Dream thinks about it, that’s very likely. “It would suck if they were to lose their hard-earned tokens just because of Shadow Armstrong’s cheating. In that case, they would have to beat her at her own game. Again.

“Navi, is there any way we can, uh” – Dream lowers his voice to a whisper – “tamper with the machine?”

“I think so,” Navi says. “There should be a computer around here.”

The computer that Navi’s mentioned is located behind the giant slot machine, guarded by a Shadow that is easily taken out with a couple of bullets. Navi steps over the scattering strips of ash and stands in front of the machine, tapping a few buttons.

An error message pops up, and Navi frowns.

“What’s wrong?” TapL asks.

“I’m supposed to be able to affect the slot machine here,” Navi says, “but there are some other terminals that aren’t active, so we need to activate those first.”

“Are they located in the staff area?” Bad asks.

“I don’t need to activate all of them,” Navi says. “Just the red and green ones.”

“Terminals tend to be in the staff area,” Techno says. “I think we’re going to have to find a way in just like last time.”

“I saw a red screen just now,” Skeppy says, scratching his head. “Somewhere nearer the entrance, I think.”

“Why not we split into two groups here?” Eret suggests. “Then we can cover more ground quicker.”

Dream nods and assigns the groups. He’d head into the staff area, arguably more dangerous, with Navi, Bad, Skeppy and TapL while the others would head on over to the entrance of the chamber. Navi is to keep in constant contact with Eret in case things go south on either side.

Bidding goodbye to the other team at the entrance to the staff area, Dream pushes the door open and dives behind a trolley, just out of sight of a patrolling Shadow emitting a fiery red aura. Nebiros had been powerful, and Dream isn’t sure he wants to take on something like that so soon after it.

He leaps from shadow to shadow, keeping himself cloaked in darkness and away from enemy eyes, followed by his team. So far, there had been only one terminal in plain sight, an orange screen glaring at them as soon as they had entered the hallway. Unfortunately, orange is a far cry from green, so they had to keep on searching, keep on delving deeper into the staff area of this Slot Machine room.

Eret and the others have already found the red terminal, which just leaves the green terminal. The fact that there’s a Shadow with a stunningly red aura patrolling this area doesn’t calm Dream’s heart down any.

“There it is!” Skeppy leaps down from a ledge, landing silently on the ground like a cat. The rest of the Thieves follow him, finding themselves in a closet. The janitor’s closet, to be exact, what with the strong smell of detergent stagnant in the air.

“They probably thought that someone was going to try to find it,” Bad says smugly, and Navi approaches the terminal. He taps a few buttons and the terminal blinks to life, its green screen even more vibrant than before. Now it’s time for them to head on over to the red terminal to activate that one too.

Dream activates his grappling hook, soaring up to the ledge where they had jumped from, only to stop short when he realizes just what he’s staring at.

The Shadow with the red aura does not give him time to react at all, bursting into its demonic form – a woman draped in drab cloths, a drooping hat perched atop her head as she levitates, sitting cross-legged in midair.

“Dream! Get away from her, now!” Navi shouts.

Dream raises his dagger in time to parry the Shadow’s claw. TapL lands beside him, the second one to have scaled the walls.

“Dream!” TapL slashes with his axe, severing the Shadow’s other claw that would have pierced Dream in his side if not for his intervention. The Shadow screeches and stumbles back through the air. She thrusts out an arm, summoning a swirling tornado to her side.

“Navi! What’s her weakness?” Dream shouts. The tap of feet beside him alerts him to another one of the Thieves’ presence.

“It’s Scathach so...no weaknesses!” Navi shouts, now floating up to Dream’s level in Necronomicon. Skeppy is the last one up, somersaulting onto the ledge. “Dream! It’s too strong! We have to run!”

If Navi says so, then it must be true. Dream ducks, dodging the slicing wind blades and pushes past her. Bad, Skeppy, TapL and Navi follow his lead, footsteps thundering down the corridor as blobs of darkness begin to emerge from the walls, plopping to the ground like agar.

They reach the entrance quickly, the Shadow still hot on their tail.

TapL spins on his heels, whipping his grenade launcher out and firing a single shell at the mass of weaker Shadows churning like a wave in front of the Scathach.

The Shadows explode like a ton of dynamite upon contact with the grenade, splotches of black now staining the floor, splattered all over the walls. That one second of black rain is enough for the Thieves to slam the door and disappear down the chamber, headed for the entrance where the rest are waiting.

*

[“You guys](#) look...very beat up,” Techno says, giving them a once-over.

“Thanks,” Skeppy mutters.

“Okay. Done,” Navi says. “The main terminal should work now. Let’s go back to the slot machine.”

Thankfully, the gargantuan slot machine is just across the room. Dodging the Shadows patrolling the chamber, they return to the slot machine, where Navi types rapidly into the holographic keyboard. He presses the “Enter” key and a pop-up window blinks onto the screen.

“It’s not a hundred per cent chance,” Navi says, shaking his head. “Around...eighty per cent, maybe?”

“Eighty per cent’s a little...” Bad trails off.

“I’d say it’s better than no chance at all,” Fundy says. “We only have one shot at this Dream.”

Dream heads back around to the front of the slot machine, its lever looking especially tempting. There’s only an eighty per cent chance. Two out of ten times, they’d fail, and there’d be no quick way to get those tokens back.

They can’t fall here.

Dream inserts their member's card and the slots begin to spin. Dream pulls the lever thrice, watching the symbols slot into place.

The first symbol, sliding into and remaining in the middle row, is one of those flashy crimson sevens. So far so good.

The second symbol that appears, sandwiched between a cherry and a diamond, is another red seven. Dream hardly dares to breathe.

As the final slot grinds to a halt, sealing their fate in stone, Dream screams in pure, unfettered joy, throwing his arms around Navi's neck and pulling him into a bear hug. The slot machine lights up, member's card slipping out from the slit they had slotted it in. Dream retrieves it and places it into his coat pocket.

"Now we've got fifty thousand tokens," Fundy says with a giant grin.

"And some more," Techno agrees.

The High Limit card is within their reach. Now all they've got to do is to exchange for it at the counter in the lobby.

*

"As promised, here is the High Limit card," the Shadow at the counter slides the card across to Dream, who picks it up and inspects it. Nothing looks quite out of the ordinary, with the name Perry Fisher inscribed on the back. It's safe to assume that there is no trick associated with this.

"Will the tokens we earn on the High Limit floor be added to our High Limit card?" Techno asks.

"No," the Shadow says. "All tokens that you win in this casino will be added to your member's card. The High Limit card merely grants you access to the High Limit floor."

Techno nods in acknowledgement. Dream clasps the card tightly in his grasp as they head back to the elevator. The Thieves clamber inside, Dream swiping the card against the reader and watching in unconcealed satisfaction as the button to the High Limit floor lights up.

"I see you've managed to conquer the Member's floor," Shadow Armstrong's voice rings overhead. "You may actually have a little bit of skill after all..."

She was just plain cheating and all they did was to cheat right back. An eye for an eye, they say.

"Criminal trials are but a gamble to be won, and us prosecutors arrange the table," Shadow Armstrong continues. "Losses are unacceptable, even if it has to be on false charges!"

"She's clearly distorted," Fundy mumbles.

Sapnap has gone absolutely quiet, gaze on the floor, as if focusing on blocking out her voice.

"We'll change her heart," Dream says, clapping a hand on his shoulder. "I promise you."

Sapnap nods, still not meeting Dream's eyes. A solemn silence fills the elevator as Dream presses the button that just lit up. The elevator's doors close and the glass car brings them even higher up in the casino.

The doors open with a ding and Dream stumbles out, relieved to get away from that cramped car. Greeting him, however, is a massive circular wall several feet from his face and a Shadow clad in a

neat tuxedo.

[“Beyond](#) this wall is the High Limit floor,” the Shadow says tonelessly. “Do you have a reservation?”

“A reservation?” Bad asks, hands on his hips.

“Seems like we need some kind of requirement to access this floor,” Eret says, “besides having the High Limit card.”

“We’re going to have to get into a trial,” Techno says. “The High Limit floor represents games that are high-risk but also high-reward. The only thing I can think of from the real world that would be a parallel to this is an actual trial.”

“But it can’t be just any trial,” Navi says. “We have to go to one where she’s prosecuting.”

“There is one, isn’t there?” Dream asks, turning to Sapnap. “She’s prosecuting a case this coming Wednesday.”

“Oh, right,” Sapnap says absently. “There is.”

“We’ll just have to attend it, right?” Skeppy asks. “Oh my God. I’ve never been to a courthouse before.”

“I thought your mom’s the lead investigator on the Phantom Thieves case?” TapL asks.

“This was the case she was working on before taking on the Phantom Thieves’ case,” Sapnap says. “Normally, another prosecutor would take charge of it, but knowing my mom...”

“We’ll figure out the details about this Wednesday’s trial,” Dream says, turning to his team, “so keep a lookout for your messages.”

“We’ve got to make sure she notices us too if we want to change her cognition,” Fundy says.

Without immediate access to the High Limit floor, the Thieves have no choice but to end their infiltration here and come back next Wednesday. For now, they’d head back and get some well-deserved rest.

“Returning to the real world. Thank you for your hard work.”

*

Chapter End Notes

i know nebiros doesnt get tetrakarn or makarakarn but honestly im running out of battle gimmicks lmao

Planning Ahead

Chapter Summary

s links + daily activities

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

11/6 – FRIDAY – EVENING

“Her upcoming trial on Wednesday?” Mr Armstrong scratches his chin, newspaper rustling between his fingers as regards Clay with an inquiring gaze. “I’m not quite sure but I think it’s sometime around three.”

Three...Clay has class till two, so if he rushes to the courthouse, he should just be able to make it just in time. He thanks Mr Armstrong and heads back up to his room, where Nick is already in bed, scrolling mindlessly through his social media.

The room is silent. So silent that one can hear a pin drop. Clay ascends the staircase to his bed as quietly as possible, finding Fundy curled up on his pillow, shifting when he approaches. It feels odd when they have nothing to do till Wednesday. Perhaps they should head into Mementos to keep their skills sharp. Or maybe Clay can invite them out to Beatty to play darts and billiards. Or Elytra’s arcade.

Clay’s mind wanders, as one’s would when they have nothing concrete to think about. He ponders the traitor. Questions their motive. Why are they doing this? Just why? They had always acted so sincerely, expressed themselves in such a raw manner.

What else are they hiding under that pleasant smile of theirs?

That night, Clay dreams of Mementos, of the traitor laughing in his face as he stabs him to death. Blood splatters everywhere, the traitor’s satisfied smile frightening in a backdrop of red and black splattered on the walls.

*

11/7 – SATURDAY – DAYTIME

Clay's thighs and calves scream with exhaustion. Perspiration drips from his hair. How in the world does Harvey manage this? That guy is a monster. Seeing his running partner jog to a halt, Harvey follows suit. They've hit their third mile and Clay is about to collapse.

"Let's find...I need...a rest," Clay pants, wishing that he's back in his bed all curled up and snuggled in a blanket burrito.

"There's a bench over there," Harvey points out.

Clay settles into the bench, the same bench where he and Harvey sat the last time, overlooking the lake of Helen Park.

"So, what did you want to talk about just now?" Just now when Clay had been struggling for breath and trying not to die.

"Oh, right." Harvey's eyes follow a flock of ducks waddling about by the shore of the lake. "It's about...inheriting my father's company."

"You mean Lee Foods?"

"Yeah," Harvey says, taking a seat next to Clay.

"But you're just an eighteen-year-old kid."

"Yeah. But I'm also my father's child."

Harvey goes quiet, wiping at his perspiration with the towel around his neck. It's hard to even imagine the full extent of what Harvey's been thrown into. From what Clay's learnt, Harvey's hardly been taught what exactly goes on in the company, much less know how to manage it. Not to mention that the company in question is a multimillion-dollar company, or even a multibillion-dollar one.

For him to have to deal with his father's death and to have this suddenly sprung on him at the same time...

"Is there anything I can help with?"

"Well..." Harvey bites his lip. "There are a lot of people coming up to me and giving me 'advice', but I don't know who to trust."

"How so?"

"Because what if they're out to get my father's money? I don't know anything about stocks and shares and stuff," Harvey mumbles. "It's...What if I trust the wrong person, and get swindled or something like that?"

"Is there anyone amongst them that you've seen before? Trust more, or something?" Clay asks. Drawing experience from their first encounter, Harvey isn't exactly...the best judge of character.

"Well, there *is* one person," Harvey nods. "He goes by Kumar, and he's come around to our house before."

"If he's closer to your dad, then maybe he has your best interests in heart."

"Maybe." Harvey knits his brows together. "But at this point, everyone seems suspicious."

"You could do some cross-referencing," Clay says. "Think about what each person has to say and compare it against the others'."

Harvey nods. "I think I'll try that and see how it goes." He laughs awkwardly. "Thanks for listening to my, uh, rant. I don't think many people would bother dealing with something like this."

"You're my teammate and I offered you my help," Clay says, flashing him a smile. "I can't back out now, can I?"

Harvey rises, eyes still on the lake. There are several boats out there now, bobbing in the water in the cold of autumn. Leaves dance to the ground, carried by the gusts of wind.

“You wanna head back?” Clay asks.

Harvey nods. The two of them make their way back to the train station and part ways there, one heading back home and the other to Valentine Hills.

*

11/7 – SATURDAY – LATE NIGHT

“How was your movie?” Nick asks, not looking up from his homework.

“Great. Excellent. Can’t be better,” Clay says, flopping into bed, a dreamy smile on his face.

“Are you being sarcastic?” Floris asks, peering up from the table where he’s helping Nick.

“A date with George can never be a bad thing; what the fuck are you talking about?” Clay huffs.

“Whatever you say, pal. Whatever you say.” Floris turns his attention back to Nick’s homework.

Clay drifts off to sleep basking in the memory of George’s warm hands and the softness of his lips, whisked away to a room coated in blue, the familiar sounds of chains rattling in his ears...

*

11/7 – SATURDAY – MIDNIGHT

“It seems that you are reaching the crux of your journey,” Igor says, tapping his fingers against his desk. His eyes are evaluating, grin ever-present. “I must commend you, Trickster.”

Trickster. There’s that word again. Only Igor ever calls him that. What’s it even supposed to mean?

“However, you must overcome a formidable adversary soon,” Igor says. “One who possesses power that you can never dream of.”

That doesn’t sound good.

“Hence, I will provide you with a new power. One that is certain to benefit you on your road to rehabilitation.”

Clay nods and closes his eyes. With a snap of Igor's fingers, energy rushes through his body, setting his blood on fire like a spark from ignition. When he next opens them, he feels stronger. His spirit is now better tempered, able to welcome more Personas into his heart. Clay's gaze lands on Igor. This man seems to be placing most of his expectations on him and Clay isn't quite sure what he should feel about that. Happiness that this mysterious being has trusted him a tad more? Or concern, because gaining the trust of someone who wields such power may bring about more troubles than it's worth? Will Igor intervene in their Phantom Thief activities in the future? Or is he merely a bystander?

Still, in this weakened state, without the manifestation of his spirit, he is in no position to challenge anyone. Clay staggers back to his lumpy mattress and lays back down into bed. His lids flutter shut and sinks back into slumber.

The next thing he wakes up to is the sound of his phone buzzing beside his head.

*

11/8 – SUNDAY – DAYTIME

“You’re giving this to me?” Clay stares down at the painting in his hands, preserved ever so nicely. The painting that they had saved from Shadow Marion’s clutches rests between his fingers, the woman depicted smiling down at her child, staring up at him.

“Yeah,” Zak says, scratching his head.

“I can’t,” Clay says, pushing it back towards him. “This is your mother’s-“

“I want you to have it,” Zak says, gently prodding at it with his finger back towards Clay.

“But-“

“Okay, fine. You’re borrowing it, then. You’re helping me hold on to it until I want it back,” Zak says exasperatedly.

Clay fixes him with a suspicious look but doesn’t push it. He’s merely borrowing the Sylvaria and will return the piece to Zak one day. One day in the near future.

“You know, I think painting for other people isn’t so bad after all,” Zak says, looking up at the sky, at the clouds drifting overhead. “Being able to portray emotion through painting, through *art*, to other people...it’s a reward in itself.” He catches himself, a hand on his nape, cheeks flushed. “Oh my God, that was so cheesy it's embarrassing.”

Clay chuckles. Through his trials and tribulations, Zak has grown considerably. His faith has never wavered, his optimism a beacon of light in the darkest abysses. Clay would be shocked if he doesn’t reach new heights with the strength of his heart, with his newfound determination.

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast turned a vow into a blood oath. It shall become the wings of rebellion and break the yoke of thy heart. Thou hast awakened to the ultimate secret of the Star, granting thee infinite power...

Clay blinks. Behind Zak, he sees an unfamiliar being radiating immense power clad in traditional Japanese garb. Kamu-Susanoo’s arms are folded, massive sword sheathed by his side. In a shower of sparkles, he vanishes, and a tiny ball of blue descends into Zak’s chest and his soul.

“Okay, I’m gonna watch a movie with Darryl,” Zak says, shoving Clay out of the room. “So get out.”

“*Just* watching a movie?”

“Yes. Now get out,” Zak says, and slams the door in Clay’s face.

Clay meets Darryl halfway down the staircase. Darryl casts him a curious gaze at the painting of Sylvaria in Clay’s hands.

“He gave that to you?”

“Yeah.” Clay adjusts the Sylvaria under his arm. “Oh, and he’s waiting upstairs.”

Darryl sees Clay out before heading back to their room and Clay makes for home with the painting secure in his grasp.

11/8 – SUNDAY – EVENING

Clay stifles a laugh as he looks up from where he's doing his homework at the dining table – rushing the worksheets as per usual – to see Nick all drenched from the pouring rain outside, the skeleton of his broken umbrella hanging loosely from his arm.

“Welcome back,” Clay barely manages to wheeze out, forehead slammed onto the table as he convulses with laughter.

“*You* should have been the one who got caught in the rain,” Nick deadpans, holding up the plastic grocery bags and placing them in front of Clay. The plastic bag drips with water, staining the worksheets. “Settle the fucking groceries.”

Clay is still bent over the table, unable to speak, a hand on his aching stomach. Nick rolls his eyes and heads up to the bathroom for a quick shower, leaving Clay breathless in the dining room.

*

11/9 – MONDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

Gina: You might wanna check this out.

Gina: Transcript2.pdf

Me: Thanks

Gina: The password's my name with my birth date

Gina: no caps

Me: okay

Gina: It's mostly about his plan on nov 20

Gina: call me if you need my help

Another twelve days. Another twelve days and they haven't even come up with a concrete plan yet. But now, with this new information, Clay thinks they may have a shot at outwitting the traitor. He texts the chatgroup – the one without the traitor in it – and calls for another meeting immediately.

One of their teammates is not free at the moment, so it will commence in the evening.

In the meantime, Clay's got some overdue homework to submit by the end of the day...

*

11/10 – TUESDAY – EVENING

Clay crashes onto his bed, face sinking into his pillow. God, his brain hurts. Clay is so very reluctant to pick up his buzzing phone right now.

He does anyway.

Gina: I'm all set

Gina: But tbh

Gina: I don't quite understand everything about the metanav

Gina: I mean i kinda get what it does and theres this bookmark feature and everything...

Me: do you need to take a second look at it?

Gina: yeah

Gina: theres something I need to test

Me: we need to do the infiltration tmr

Me: Thurs good for u?

Gina: ya

Well, Clay knows where he's going tomorrow after school. He wonders if George can grab him some of those cream teas from last time. They were really good, particularly with some tea.

*

Chapter End Notes

Strength arcana rank 1 -> 2 (TapL)

Charm +5 (watched movie)

Judgement arcana rank 4 -> 5 (igor)

Star arcana rank 9 -> 10 MAX (skeppy)

Knowledge +6 (studying)

Casino of Envy: Infiltration Core

Chapter Summary

just the maze of darkness for this chap i gotta split it up into 2 parts somehow

Chapter Notes

hi guys

I've noticed some people have commented saying that they don't receive notifications when I update. I checked out ao3's official twitter page to see if they said anything about the situation and they've only mentioned that several Polish email providers are no longer accepting emails from ao3! Please do check that the emails aren't headed into your spam folder as well!

For friends whose email notifications still aren't working I update daily around 10:45pm Singapore Time which is 2:45pm GMT and 9:45am EST at the latest! If you check past those times a new chapter would definitely have been posted!

11/11 – WEDNESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“You don’t look so good.” Darryl tilts his head, concern in his voice.

“Yeah, you look like shit.” Zak giggles.

“Language!”

“I’m...fine!” Clay’s hands shoot out, palm flat against the wall. “I’m fucking...fine...” He wants to die.

“Language!”

“Anyway,” Eret says loudly, “shall we go in?”

The lobby is emptying already, the other members of the public moving through the impressive doorways and heading to the gallery seats. Blade leads the way, the rest of the Thieves following him into the courtroom. The room is silent save for people shuffling into their seats.

According to Blade, the case involves a girl with divorced parents having had photographs taken of her that made her extremely uncomfortable. The couple in question had turned themselves in and offered a confession.

For some reason, the case seems quite familiar to Clay...

He spots Mrs Armstrong seated at the prosecutor’s bench, staring at her notes spread out on her bench as she waits for the defence lawyer to arrive.

“We need her to notice us, right?” Harvey hisses.

“She will eventually,” Nick whispers. “I texted her this morning. She knows we’re here.”

“She might not have read it, though.”

They’d just have to believe.

The defence lawyer steps into the solemn chamber, striding right up to his seat and sits down. Mrs Armstrong lifts her head, giving her opponent a once-over, before casting a quick glance at the gallery.

Once she meets Clay’s eyes, a bubble of triumph tickles at his insides. He relishes in that surprised expression, in the fact that she has seen them. That would certainly change her cognition in their favour.

They leave during the recess, gathered right outside the courthouse. Clay activates the Meta-Nav, and the Thieves are once more phased into the Metaverse, where a casino in full swing stands in the place of the courthouse. Dream throws up an arm to shield his eyes from the glare of the flashy rays of light piercing from the windows.

“Let’s go,” he says, and the Thieves move out.

*

[The elevator](#) dings and the doors open. Dream steps out onto the High Limit floor, blinded by walls washed with shocking pink, scarlet pools of light beamed from above. The cognitive beings here are especially well-dressed in tuxedos and gowns, suits and dresses.

“My eyes hurt,” Bad says, shifting his gaze to the ground.

“It’s bright,” TapL agrees.

“There’s another one of those guys over there,” Techno says, gesturing towards a counter in the middle of the floor, where a Shadow in a uniform stands behind. He’d probably know something about how they can get to the Manager’s floor, where the Treasure probably is. Dream strides over to the counter with Techno and Navi beside him.

“Welcome to the High Limit floor,” the Shadow says, bowing. “There are two games-“

“How do we get to the Manager’s floor?” Dream interrupts him, hands in his pockets.

The Shadow is stunned for a second, but he recovers quickly. “If you would please follow me over here.”

The Shadow struts towards a giant doorway lit up with flickering pixie lights, over to what appears to be a chasm that, if they fall through, would thrust them into a never-ending abyss that they would have no hope of returning from. At the other end of the ravine lies another golden doorway, pixie lights winking mockingly at them.

“That door leads to the Manager’s floor,” the Shadow tells them. “However, you would require a fee of a hundred thousand tokens to lower the bridge.”

“A hundred thousand? Are you serious?” Zak cries.

“And we thought fifty thousand was a lot,” Sapnap mutters.

“What are the games on this floor?” Eret asks.

“We do have the Maze of Darkness and the Battle Arena,” the Shadow says. The team follows him back into the main area. The Maze of Darkness is located on their left, and the Battle Arena on their right.

“The Battle Arena requires a ten-thousand-token entrance fee,” the Shadow explains. “I do believe that the Maze of Darkness would be more suited to newcomers like yourselves.”

“Just a quick question,” Navi says, stepping forward. “Why are you helping us? Aren’t you supposed to stop us from getting to the Treasure?”

“Lady Armstrong would prefer that all her guests play a fair game,” the Shadow says. “I’m not helping you. I’m merely telling you what you have to do.”

“A fair game, you say?” Techno bites his lip, a half-grin on his face.

“Indeed.” The Shadow returns to his spot behind the counter and the Thieves head on over to a safe room that Navi has located. It is more cushiony than the previous one, with more luxurious couches and a mini chandelier that hangs from the ceiling. However, it’s small with hardly enough places to sit.

“It’s definitely not going to be a fair game,” Fundy says.

“Yeah, I think we can assume that,” Dream says.

“The games will have a gimmick,” Techno says, “and that’s what we have to figure out before we go in there.”

“I don’t think it’ll be as simple as adjusting probabilities since we’re not playing slot machines or dice,” Eret says.

“Let’s go see what the game is about first,” TapL says. “The Maze of Darkness, right?”

Dream has never heard of that game but they have no choice but to play it. If not now, then eventually. They exit the room and head towards the hallway, the shining words “Maze of Darkness” affixed to the archway above their heads.

A Shadow croupier stands at a counter by a locked door. Dream walks up to him.

“Your card, please.”

Dream hands him their member’s card and the Shadow deducts the fee of a thousand tokens.

“Since you do not have any proxies to bet on, it would appear that you would have to attempt the maze yourself,” the Shadow says. “If you manage to reach the end of the maze, you would earn ten times the amount deducted. Of course, you would be allowed to return to the entrance whenever you wish.”

“Ten thousand tokens right off the bat...” Bad shakes his head. “They don’t call this the High Limit floor for nothing.”

“Allowed to come back whenever we want? There’s got to be a gimmick somewhere,” Fundy says, voice smothered by the cranking of the metal doors as it opens, revealing a pitch-black room – Hallway? Space? – ahead of them. “We have to be on our guard.”

Dream nods, ignoring the tremble in his limbs. It's just a maze. He'd just stick to the right-hand rule and eventually he would reach the end of the maze. He's just got to tell himself that.

The key to the maze lies in the gimmick. He's got to work out the gimmick in complete darkness, with only the soft tune of the casino's background music a slight comfort in this blackness.

*

"We're right back at the entrance!" Fundy cries, laying a paw against the door that they had entered, a piercing red Return sign hanging over their heads.

"Are you sure you can't sense anything, Navi?" Dream asks, leaning against the wall. While his eyes are now somewhat accustomed to the dark, the further he goes in, the less he sees. Moreover, there must be some kind of jamming signal in this place, because Navi is unable to draw up a map. Not even of the routes they have taken.

"No. Sorry." A hologram fizzles before him, its pale light a sight for sore eyes.

"It's fine," Dream says, sighing. The right-hand rule isn't working. How the heck does the right-hand rule not work with a maze?

"I know what you're thinking, Dream," Techno says. "And I also think that that's where the gimmick lies."

That's where the gimmick lies? What is that supposed to mean? Think, Dream, think. This maze must have been tampered with such that they are unable to win, just as how the probabilities of the dice and the slot machines have been altered. The Maze of Darkness is no longer a game of chance. Cognitive beings are betting on the success of other cognitive beings, as if betting on horses at a stadium.

What kind of gimmick would keep them from finding the exit to the maze?

"The only thing I can think of," Techno says, "is that the maze is sealed."

"If a path of the maze has been blocked off, then no matter what we do, we won't be able to get to the end," Eret says, rubbing his chin.

"What if there's a hidden passageway?" Bad asks. "When we were feeling along the wall just now, I felt something strange."

"What do you mean?" Dream asks.

"Like a gust of wind," Bad says. "I was thinking that there could have been an air vent passing through this place."

A hidden air vent, hmm? A distinct possibility. If that's the case, then they should get searching for it immediately. The air vent could very well lead them past the aforementioned sealed wall and out of the maze.

Well, what do they have to lose? Pressing his palm flat against the wall again, Dream begins to walk, a little more confidently this time. Bad had mentioned that he had felt a breeze. A breeze an indication of a secret passageway that could be their key to the Maze of Darkness.

The journey back into the maze is long and arduous. Dream steps over a few wailing bodies, some lying flat on their backs, the others knelt on the ground, bawling their eyes out. They must be the

proxies, Dream thinks. The proxies sent to clear the maze, only to realize that there's no way to reach the end.

All of a sudden, Dream feels it. The gentle caress of a breeze easily missed had they not been looking out for it. Dream kneels, tracing his fingers along the wall, till he reaches the part of it where the breeze is the strongest. The rest of the Thieves surround him as Dream slides the grate off, the metal plate clanking to the ground.

The air vent is big enough for them to crawl through. Dream quashes down his slight claustrophobia and squeezes himself into the vent. It's a tighter fit than he'd have liked – it's not meant for anyone to just wriggle in, after all – but it's manageable.

Thankfully, the snaking vent does not last long. Rattling the grate on the other end loosens it. With a strong push, the grate comes tumbling off, clattering noisily against the concrete floor. It's still pitch-black – they must be in another segment of the maze.

When Dream emerges from the vent, however, the first thing he sees is a pair of red eyes, the first thing he hears a low growl and the first thing that happens to him is the unforgiving grasp of a claw against his throat. His back hits the wall, forcing the air from his lungs. Dream's fingers scrabble at the claws around his neck, the claws digging so deep that they're going to leave marks for sure.

A blade of wind comes out of nowhere, green blinding in the dark. It severs the Shadow's arm, releasing Dream from its grip. Dream whips his pistol out and fires in blindly at the burst of red from the Shadow's body. His bullet strikes something, globules of red and black splattering onto the walls and ground.

One by one, the rest of the Thieves clamber out of the vent. A pillar of flames flares up from the ground and even reaches the ceiling, giving them a reprieve from the darkness. They are in a giant chamber, facing down a colossal snake shimmering with golden skins. A man's torso is attached to one end of it, a glimmering crown lined with jewels sitting on its head. He wields an equally shiny, golden trident, forked tongue flicking in and out of his mouth.

The fire is gone as soon as it had appeared, once more plunging them into darkness. God, without light of some sort, they're just sitting ducks!

"The enemy is Raja Naga!" Navi shouts. "It has no weaknesses but don't use Zio!"

There's no point assembling a team if none of them can see each other. Dream barely manages to dodge the trident that comes out of nowhere, spear spiralling forth and nicking his ear as he throws himself to the left.

Electricity buzzes in the air, sparking and crackling. With a flick of his wrist, Dream swaps his Persona out to Sarasvati before he's shocked by a thousand volts. Thorns shoot through his veins, coagulating into a constant stream of pain in his chest.

"Fundy!" Navi shouts.

A thump against the wall has Dream snapping his head to the side. Fundy must have fallen to one of the stray bolts. With this blanket of black, it's impossible to strike, impossible to dodge. Impossible to fight.

They need some sort of light to even stand a chance or they'd just get struck down in turn.

A hint of light flashes at the corner of Dream's eye. He glances back to see tiny lanterns of ice, a sphere of white contained within, floating towards them, spreading out over the battlefield, lighting

the chamber up. It's only then that Dream realizes just how big the Raja Naga is. Its body takes up literally the entire room, leaving them hardly any space to manoeuvre.

"It's going to use Maziodyne again!"

Dream stomps the ground, green strips of light spidering on the ground, healing up everyone who was injured from that last onslaught of electricity. The Raja Naga lets loose its storm of electricity once more, bolts raining from on high.

TapL hacks and slashes at its body, axe cleaving it in half. The Raja Naga roars in pain as black blood splashes to the ground. It swings its trident wildly in panic which the team dodges easily.

Sapnap leaps into the air, cudgel raised above his head. The Raja Naga fires a stream of electricity at him, only for the bolts to fizzle into nothingness as soon as it touches his body. Sapnap slams his cudgel straight into the Raja Naga's head with a sickening crack. The Shadow's trident crashes to the ground, leaving it totally defenseless.

"Techno!" Sapnap shouts.

Techno walks up to the dizzy Raja Naga ever so calmly, light sabre in hand. With one clean sweep, Techno slices its head off and the Shadow bursts into dust. As if on cue, the balls of ice, makeshift lightbulbs, rupture as well, releasing the spheres of light that fade into black. Darkness descends on them all again.

["That's..."](#) Dream shudders. "That's that."

"So not only is there no way through the maze, they've got Shadows in here?" Navi mutters.

"Seems that way," Eret says. "I doubt that Shadow's the last one."

It's brighter here – at least Dream can see two feet in front of him. Still, he places a hand on the wall and moves slowly, the other Thieves following suit. Who knows what might be hiding around the corner...

*

"Congratulations on reaching the goal." The Shadow at the end greets them with a pleasant smile. Dream holds his arm out, shielding his eyes from the light. "Being the first ones ever to have done so, you deserve your ten thousand tokens."

"Of course we were the first," Fundy mumbles. They got their ten thousand tokens, and that's all that really matters. With these ten thousand tokens, they'd be able to take part in the Battle Arena. Dream just hopes that that game gives a high-enough payout for them to activate that Scales of Justice Bridge.

"The exit is this way." The Shadow leads them over to a door that opens up to a plain walkway. It remains behind, but following the walkway takes them back to where they had started, now just ten thousand tokens richer.

"Guys, I hate to break it to you, but we spent so long in that maze that we're gonna be fucking late for curfew," Sapnap says and Dream's heart stops.

"Language."

"We're not," Dream says, after checking his phone, shoulders sagging in relief. "We'd just need to

brisk walk.”

“Brisk walk? At peak hour?”

“I think,” Techno interrupts, “that we should get out of here because clearly, three people need to get home as soon as possible and would get skinned alive if they don’t.”

“Then we’ll come back and clear the Battle Arena another time,” Dream says quickly. “Now let’s get the hell outta here.”

Dream casts a Goho-M onto the ground, white smoke fogging up the entire lobby as the Thieves are whisked back to the entrance of the casino, once again met with blinding spotlights and classy music booming in the background. Dream activates his phone at lightning speed, praying with all his heart that he’d make it back in time...

“Returning to the real world. Thank you for your hard work.”

*

11/11 – WEDNESDAY – EVENING

Zak: yoooooooooooo

Zak: Image.png

Gina: yo that looks sick

Darryl: those better be cleaned up before I get back

Darryl: and don’t spill paint on my laptop!

Zak: they were at a fucking 80% discount

Zak: 11.11 for the win man

Me: it’s 11.11

Me: the day when everything’s cheap and people buy shit

Me: crap

George: I got u something, clay

George: but I think it will take a while to arrive

George: I’d put it around the 15th

Me: <333

George: ;)

Zak: gtfo

Harvey: get a room

Nick: hes fucked

Me: WDYM

George: ???

Eret: yeah hes gone

Harvey: im confused

Me: NO

Zak: even I got Darryl something

Me: WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK ZAK

George: yeah clay wheres my present

George: jk you don't actually have to get me anything

Me: WHAT DO YOU MEAN I GOT YOU SOMETHING

George: :)

Clay scrambles for his laptop and throws open the lid. Welp, maybe it's time for him to check out that new website going around school that sells things for cheap – Shady Commodities, they call it...

Casino of Envy: Infiltration Finale

Chapter Summary

the battle arena

Chapter Notes

with every chapter im nearer and nearer 11/20 oh god i hope whatever im planning would work sia

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

11/12 – THURSDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“Okay, so it looks like you can do this...”

“So you can access it remotely?”

“Yeah. I can. As long I have another phone with the Meta-Nav installed.”

“I’d leave my phone with one of the team and then you can meet up with them to carry out the plan. Floris, can I count on you for that?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Okay. I think I’ve got a plan in mind now.”

“Alright. Let’s hear it.”

*

11/12 – THURSDAY – EVENING

“No, no, no! You’re supposed to bend it a little more!” Floris cries.

“Fucking Goho-Ms don’t exist in the real world! Cut me some slack!” Clay just wants to rest his tired eyes. He’s run out of Goho-Ms last he’s checked and it’s a little worrying to continue infiltration without any readily on hand.

“That sentence didn’t even make sense,” Nick says, not looking up from his game where he’s gunning zombies to death.

Clay shoots him a glare which Nick doesn’t see. “Try working on something for like” – he glances at the clock on the wall – “close to an hour and have a fox boy run up to you and say ‘hey, I don’t think that looks quite right’.” He doesn’t see the way Floris flinches, ears flat against his head.

Nick glances over for a split second, but remains silent.

[“You’re tired,”](#) Floris says, pawing at his hand. “Give it a rest. Lemme finish it up.”

Clay eyes him. Floris *has* made a couple of lockpicks and such despite the lack of...of opposable thumbs. Through magic, Clay thinks. Some forbidden magic Floris isn’t telling him about.

"Yeah, Clay. You gotta sleep sometime," Nick says.

“Fine,” Clay snaps, stepping away from the desk and heading up to his bed. He still hasn’t recovered from yesterday’s infiltration. His muscles are sore, his spirit is drained, he just wants to sleep it all off.

Clay falls asleep before his head even hit the pillow, prepared to sink once more into his recurring nightmares, dreams of the man in the black mask pointing a gun right in his face that have plagued him ever since he confirmed his identity.

Sometimes, when Clay’s eyes snap open in the middle of the night, staring at the ceiling illuminated by a pool of moonlight, he wonders if he should have just remained in blissful ignorance. He should have just accepted his fate, if it meant that he didn’t have to live through every single night with agonizing pain.

*

[11/13 – FRIDAY – DAYTIME](#)

“Wait, guys,” Navi says, holding up a hand. Dream watches as his holographic map expands, showing a new area of Mementos that had just appeared.

“That must mean that the door at the end of the last area just opened up,” Fundy says.

“Why did it, though?” Bad asks. “I mean, people hate us now.”

“They may hate us, but we’re more famous now,” Eret points out.

“You mean *infamous*,” Dream mutters. “Well, whatever opens up a new area, I guess.”

They had some targets to take care whose details Yao Yi had sent him a few days ago, but they had been too caught up with their planning that they haven’t had the time. They *could* spare some time to check out the new area after dealing with the targets...

“I had no idea something this...weird was sitting under the city.” Blade glances around, more in awe than fear. Not that Dream expected anything less.

They pile into the Fundybus and Eret steps on the accelerator, heading even deeper into Mementos.

*

[11/13 – FRIDAY – EVENING](#)

“Why’re they so loud?” Nick groans, glaring out the window at the flashy car just passing by their house. Clay shrugs, book in hand. The election is coming up, after all, and the politician that seems to have garnered the most support as of now is that Singh guy.

“Yeah, it’s annoying.” Floris yawns.

Clay sticks his earphones into his ears, opening up Spotify and putting his playlist on shuffle. He

shifts onto his stomach, propping his elbows on his pillow and forcing Floris to one corner.

Tomorrow, they're going back into the Palace, and Clay needs all the energy he can get. Before the clock even strikes midnight, he's put his book to the side and plugged his phone in to charge. He turns to his side, a hand under his pillow, the other swiping Floris' tail from his face.

This time, he falls into a dreamless sleep.

*

11/14 – SATURDAY – DAYTIME

Dream and company stand before the intimidating, flashing doorway, the words "Battle Arena" splashed above their heads in blocky lettering. A Shadow stands at the reception counter, greeting them as they approach.

"Welcome to the Battle Arena," he says. "The entrance fee is ten thousand tokens."

They have more than enough on hand. Dream hands over their card and the tokens are deducted.

"Seeing as you are unable to bet on proxies, one of you would have to step in as one and fight to the death in the arena," the Shadow says, a grin slowly creeping onto his face.

"Wait, one of us?" Sappnap steps forward.

"Indeed. The participants would have a series of one-on-one fights with our best selection of staff," the Shadow says. "One may not leave the arena until the other side is dead or are killed themselves."

Dream bites his lip. The choice is obvious.

"I'll go."

"Dream!" Navi hisses, grabbing onto his wrist. "There's something fishy about this."

"I assure you that there isn't," the Shadow says pleasantly. "It would be a true test of abilities between the participant in our staff. However..." His tongue runs seductively over his bottom lip. "Your navigator may join you in battle, should it please you."

Dream narrows his eyes. He has to be the one to do this. There's no way he's putting his team in danger, and Navi is the most logical choice since he'd remain protected in Necronomicon's shell.

"Dream, you're our leader," Bad says. "If you die, then..."

"It's *because* I'm the leader that I ought to go," Dream says. "A leader can't put any of their teammates' lives in jeopardy."

"Seriously." Techno sighs. "From what I've seen, the leader has no trust in his teammates, and the teammates have no trust in their leader." He folds his arms. "Practically speaking, Dream has the most elemental coverage out of all of us, since he can switch Personas, and Navi is going in with him. Even if you want to think about this logically, Dream's the one who's most likely to come out of this in one piece."

"Techno's right," Eret says. He glances away, as if embarrassed. "I...I wish you the best of luck, Dream."

“Don’t forget that there’s someone you gotta save,” Fundy says.

Dream nods. How can he forget? He turns to Navi, then to the Shadow.

“Come on, let’s get in there and win this thing.”

*

[Dream’s](#) ears ring with the thunderous applause and cheers of the audience of cognitive beings and Shadows alike. If they win this game, the payout would be a hundred thousand tokens – just enough for them to make it across to the Manager’s floor, where the Treasure is located. Navi stands beside him, ready to call on Necronomicon whenever.

“Our participant today is this foolish challenger!” the emcee’s voice booms overhead. “He will be participating in a series of battles and if he comes out victorious, then he will win a hundred thousand tokens!”

On cue, Dream steps out into the arena with Navi right behind him. Electrified fences spring up around the arena, forming a dome, preventing escape. Dream squares his shoulders. He’s got this. No matter what they throw at him, he’ll find a way to eradicate them.

The door on the other side opens and three Shadows spring forward, eyes a milky white, long, spiky hair tumbling past their shoulders. Their claws give off the most insidious shine in the glare of the bright lights above them.

“Three Shadows? That’s cheating!” Navi cries.

“Well, they never said that they were going to play fair.” A pillar of green flames engulf Navi and he is lifted safely into Necronomicon’s body. Dream steels himself, watching as the three Shadows dance about, waving their claws threateningly.

“They’re Rangda,” Navi says. “Weak to Zio and Kou skills!”

Dream summons Atropos, drawing a giant thundercloud that covers the whole dome. Lightning bolts rain from above, zapping each Rangda to oblivion. All that’s left of the Shadows after that electrifying assault is a shroud of dust. That was easy.

“The challenger has cleared the first round easily! But it would only get harder from here!” the emcee shouts, microphone screeching in Dream’s ear. Dream watches as the door opens again, this time, two Shadows diving onto the arena. He’s seen these before. Bipedal elephants that wield frightening cutlasses.

“These are Ganesha! Weak to Psi!”

Dream ducks as a sword slices where his neck was, chopping off a couple of strands of hair. He swaps from Atropos to Bugs, firing off a couple of purple spheres that home in on the Ganesha. He manages to take one down, the Shadow dissolving into ash, but the other skilfully cleaves each sphere open, destroying the missiles in mid-air.

It makes another clumsy slash at Dream who somersaults out of the way. He raises his dagger just in time to block the Ganesha’s final strike, the two blades clashing with a resounding clang.

Dream’s got it right where he wants it.

He drops to the ground and Ganesha topples forth with a shocked screech. Dream makes a swipe

for its legs, knocking it off its feet. Dream draws his pistol, aiming its barrel at Ganesha's forehead. The bang of the gunshot rips at his eardrums, black blood splattering to the ground as the Ganesha is eliminated.

"How?" the emcee sounds more outraged than anything. "This challenger was supposed to have..." He composes himself. "This challenger has one more battle to go and this will be the hardest one yet!"

"Let's go, Dream," Navi says.

Dream watches as the doors slide open once more, the cheers and screams of the audience louder than ever before. What steps through is another Shadow, this one on the buff side, wielding a hammer crackling with electricity.

"The Shadow's Thor," Navi says. "No weaknesses, but don't use Zio!"

Thor roars, ribbons of light streaming out from the ground around its feet. Dream has no idea what that's supposed to mean, but from Navi's panicked yelling, it's nothing good.

"Dream! Get back!"

Thor shoots forth like a bullet through the air, its speed faster than Dream would have thought given its bulky build. Dream tries to throw himself to the side, only to be caught by the ankle and hurled into the air.

Shit! It's nearly impossible to manoeuvre in the air!

"Dream! Switch to something that resists Zio!"

Obedying Navi's instructions, Dream switches out to Narcissus, shrugging off Thor's bolt of electricity as he hurtles back down to the ground. He tenses his body, bracing himself. He lands hard on his shoulder, the impact profound enough to dislocate his shoulder entirely.

Dream winces, pushing himself to his feet, chest heaving as pain lances through him. It's as if someone has set his shoulder on fire. A fire that never ceases. Wisps of green curl around him, relocating his shoulder with only a smattering of pinpricks.

However, that relief doesn't last long, for the next moment, Thor needs only to swing his hammer and the force sends Dream flying across the arena, body slamming into the electric fence.

The audience gasps collectively. The emcee goes wild, screaming his commentary with unconcealed glee. Dream grits his teeth. If not for the fact that Narcissus is immune to Zio, Dream would have been a goner right there. He can taste blood in his mouth. The world blurs and spins around him like he's just ridden a roller coaster.

"Oh my God! Dream! Use Diarahan or something! Please!"

Half of Dream's face has gone numb. It's a wonder he can still stand. Blood has filled his entire mouth, dribbling from his chin. One eye has failed him. Fire rips through the right side of his face as he stares down Thor, panting heavily. Neither fighter can leave while the other is still alive.

And God, Dream probably has one foot in the grave with how that hammer slammed right into his face.

Thor does not let up, rushing Dream again with its hammer. Navi barely manages to block the blow

with a wall of Necronomicon's tentacles, the tentacles vanishing after taking that one hit, but it had given Dream enough time to cast a Diarahan on himself, healing his face just enough to restore his eyesight and hearing.

Dream summons Koumokuten and meets Thor's next swing head on. His dagger flies from his hands, blade spinning in the air as it stabs the ground a fair distance from their skirmish. Dream pounces to one side, narrowly dodging Thor's next attack. A shroud of green cloaks him and Dream's body feels lighter, his movements faster.

He dives behind Thor and summons Horus. He throws a palm out, a ball of white gathered at his fingertips. A cloud of red surrounds him, giving Dream the boost he needs to generate an even larger sphere, gathering energy from all around him.

When Thor raises his hammer, Dream lets the sphere loose. He shields his eyes from the blinding light of the explosion that blows Thor to bits, leaving nothing behind but a pile of ash.

[The arena](#) goes silent for a second before the audience cheers, fists pumped into the air, demanding an encore. Dream shambles over to his companion, dropping his head into his shoulder. He sinks into Navi's embrace, arms too tired to move. Relishes in Navi's fingers running through his hair, his low murmurs of sweet nothings in his ear as he leads him out of there by the wrist.

The rest of the Thieves greet them at the entrance, Sapnap and TapL throwing their arms around Dream in a bear hug. Eret and Fundy congratulating him. Bad asking if he needs to patch anything up (particularly his face).

"I thought you were actually going to die in here," Techno says.

"I would never," Dream huffs.

["As promised](#), your hundred thousand tokens has been added to your cards," the Shadow at the counter says, handing Dream both cards back. Dream glances at Techno.

"You bet on me?"

"It's better to have more coins than fewer," Techno says with a shrug as he accepts the card from Dream.

In any case, they now have the hundred thousand tokens required to lower the justice scales bridge and to reach the Manager's floor. Bad helps Dream mend his cracked cheekbone before they make a beeline for the doorway that leads to the chasm.

A machine stands to the corner, one that accepts cards, possibly meant to lower the bridge. Dream inserts his member's card into the slot and his number of tokens flash on the screen. A hundred and three thousand tokens, the three thousand earned from the Member's floor.

"It seems you've put in so much effort to earn those tokens..." Shadow Armstrong's voice floats from above. Dream whips his head around. There, standing at the doorway to the Manager's floor, is the Ruler herself, with her arms folded, smirking condescendingly at them.

"Unfortunately," she continues, "I cannot let you pass." She raises a hand. "From here on, the number of tokens needed to lower the bridge is one million!"

"What the hell?" Fundy cries.

"You can't just give us an impossible task like that!" Skeppy snaps.

“Don’t you see?” Shadow Armstrong spreads her arms. “The task is *supposed* to be impossible! You can never complete it. It is futile to even try for in the end, I will emerge victorious.”

She only cares about winning. That much is obvious. Dream can hardly blame her, not when it is their little band of merry men that brought this much pressure onto her. Still, a million tokens? They’d just barely gotten a hundred thousand, ten per cent of what they now need.

“A million tokens?” Techno says, stepping over to them from the doorway to the High Limit floor. “Are you kidding me? That’s easy.”

“Easy?” TapL looks unconvinced.

“You guys remember what we were told? At the very beginning?” Techno says, inserting a second card into the machine.

“Which part?” Dream asks.

Their total flashes on screen.

“That we can borrow as many tokens as we wanted currently on our card,” Techno says as he pulls the lever. Tokens begin to fill one scale, lime green coins spilling out onto the metal plate.

“So what you mean to say is...”

“When we had ten thousand on our card, borrowing the max would get us twenty thousand. If we had bet on you as a guest, which I did, our total would have hit four hundred and sixty thousand.”

The tokens stop flowing and the scales are now unbalanced. The bridge shifts, connecting the High Limit floor to the Manager’s floor, where Shadow Armstrong currently stands.

“Then we would have had five hundred thousand in total,” Dream says. “But that wasn’t enough-“

“When my card hit four hundred and sixty thousand, I borrowed the maximum a second time. So if we pay back the ten thousand I initially borrowed, we would still get nine hundred and ten thousand on that John Doe card.”

“My head’s spinning,” Sapnap groans.

“Then if we added our total, we would have reached a million tokens. And more,” Dream realizes. Techno nods.

“How?” Shadow Armstrong cries, her hands in her hair. “That’s impossible!”

“Since you cheat, at literally every single game, I had to game the system somehow,” Techno says. He turns to the rest. “Come on, the Treasure’s just ahead.”

When Dream glances back at the doorway to the Manager’s floor, Shadow Armstrong is gone. With his team behind him, he dashes across the bridge and through the doorway that leads to a flight of stairs.

“The Treasure’s just above our heads,” Navi says. Dream’s footsteps thunder against the metal stairs and landing until he reaches the top. Pushing open another heavy door, Dream opens the chamber to the Treasure, a fancy lobby decorated with the four suits, a podium standing in the middle with a cloudy shape hovering over it.

“That’s the Treasure?” Techno asks, squinting at it.

“Yeah, but we need to send the calling card first,” Bad says. “And that decision is left up to Dream.”

“Since he’s the leader,” Techno says, nodding. He holds up a hand. “Might I suggest something?”

“What is it?” Fundy asks.

“We carry out this stealing-her-heart thing on the nineteenth of November,” Techno says. “One day before the twentieth.”

“Why?” Navi looks confused.

“You see, Molly isn’t going to act before the twentieth; that’s what she told me yesterday,” Techno says. “So if we’re gonna put a lot of pressure on her, we’re going to have to do it one day before that date.”

“It’s to get the Treasure to form for sure. Is that right?” Eret says thoughtfully. “Seeing a calling card right before she presses false charges is going to change her cognition severely.”

[We](#) can’t fail this one,” Bad agrees.

“The reputation of the Phantom Thieves is at stake,” Dream says, nodding. “This is probably going to be our last heist together, since Techno wants us to stop being the Thieves and all.”

Techno hums.

“If we’re going to leave this business behind, we’re going to go out with a bang.”

*

Chapter End Notes

List of Dream's Personas (11/12):

- Atropos
- White Rider
- Unicorn
- Bugs
- Sarasvati
- Dakini
- Narcissus
- Koumokuten
- Pazuzu
- Horus
- Ananta

Guts +3 (read book)

A Promise to My Rival

Chapter Summary

just some s links leading up to the life will change chap!

Chapter Notes

WELL WELL WELL i've almost completed my preparations for the 11/20 chaps!

WARNING (not sure if i have to warn for this but im gonna put it here anyway): DNF content on 11/16 (Monday, After School)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

11/14 – SATURDAY – EVENING

Clay is pooped from all that running around in the Palace today. While Bad and Fundy's magic had helped loads, his cheek still smarts. Clay rubs at it, flinching when a sharp pain arrows through his head.

"You shouldn't touch that," Fundy says, lifting his head from where it's buried in the pillow. "Not until it's fully healed."

"How am I supposed to sleep then?"

"Just sleep on your other side, nimrod," Nick says.

"I can't. I *have* to sleep on my right side."

Nick scoffs. Floris laughs. Clay sighs and wonders why his friends love to torment him so.

*

11/15 – SUNDAY – DAYTIME

"So, how have things been going for your initiatives?" Clay asks. He's seen signs and posters put up on the bulletin board in various campuses, advertising Eret's new feedback sessions.

"Going quite well, I'd say," Eret says, staring at the still waters of the Valleyberth fishing pond. Clay feels a tug on his string and he reels it in, the trout hooked securely, flopping desperately before Clay dumps it in the bucket of water beside him.

"Really? Have people come to see you?"

"Well..." Eret tilts his head. "I don't think anyone's come to see me yet, but I've received a couple of feedback forms."

“What were they about?”

“Mostly a few improvements here and there. Addition of a Student Lounge, for example. I’m working with the school on getting financial help for students who need it.” He pauses, thinking. “Of course, there *were* forms calling me a dick to my face.”

“That sucks,” Clay says, reeling in another fish.

“I’d like to think of them as baby steps.”

Clay hums approvingly. That’s Eret, alright. Willing to persevere for as long as it takes till he achieves his goal. That energy is contagious. Encouraging, even.

Oh, he’s got another one. He reels that in too.

“How the hell are you getting more fish than I am?” Eret’s gaze darts from Clay’s rod to his own.

“It takes practice.”

Eret laughs. They fish for another couple of minutes, with Clay filling up a whole bucket while Eret’s has two tiny trout swimming inside. While Clay is exchanging his fish for points, he hears Eret speaking to someone outside.

“How’s your brother doing?”

“Huh? He’s fine. Thanks for your help, by the way.”

That voice is familiar.

“You’re welcome. If you need someone to talk to, I can always be your listening ear.”

As Clay walks out the fishing pond, he notices someone in a wine-coloured jacket, sleeves mismatched colours chatting with a friend. Isn’t that Karl? Clay meets Eret outside, the latter looking somewhat happier.

“Was that...?”

“Karl? Yeah,” Eret says, nodding. “I had assumed the worst about him when we first met him at Bowarrow, but we had a little chat sometime last week.”

“A little chat?”

“His brother needs money for his medical bills,” Eret says, “and he was merely working. Getting financial assistance wasn’t easy but I’ve managed to get the deputy principal to consider it.”

“That’s good.”

“As long as I can help as many students as possible, then that’s enough for me,” Eret says. “My term is soon coming to an end, but I’m hoping that the next generation of Student Council members would be able to continue to serve the student body to their fullest ability.”

The legacy Eret will leave behind will not be forgotten, Clay thinks. They may forget his name, the fact that he was even a part of the school, but not his kindness borne from his willingness to improve himself.

“Well, Clay,” Eret says. “I hope there won’t be any hiccups on the twentieth.”

Clay kicks a pebble. “No, I don’t think there will be. The preparations are already complete.”

“Indeed they are.”

The two of them head back to the train station where they part ways for the evening.

*

11/15 – SUNDAY – EVENING

<Phoenix SC> Hello

<Phoenix SC> long time no see

<Dream> hello to you too

<Phoenix SC> I’m sorry to say that I won’t be logging on anymore

<Phoenix SC> I’ve just gotten full custody of my daughter, and I thought you’d like to know

<Phoenix SC> thanks for your help by the way

<Phoenix SC> for changing Blossomfield’s heart

<Dream> What. That wasn’t me

<Phoenix SC> theres no way that the change of heart could have happened so fast

<Phoenix SC> I’ve looked through the other forum requests and when the ‘thank you’s were posted

<Phoenix SC> and uh I seem to have noticed

<Phoenix SC> my request being fulfilled a little earlier than others

<Dream> um

<Phoenix SC> tbh I wasn’t entirely sure it was you

<Phoenix SC> but you were the only one I’ve spoken to about the Phantom Thieves.

<Phoenix SC> so I decided to say that

<Phoenix SC> and see what your reaction was

<Dream> well

<Phoenix SC> thanks for your help. Really. I appreciate it

<Phoenix SC> I won’t tell anyone. Im not going to betray someone im indebted to

<Phoenix SC> it’s because of you that right now my daughter and I are able to talk with each other, to play soccer

<Phoenix SC> to do all kinds of things

<Phoenix SC> I know the news is talking about how you guys are murderers

<Phoenix SC> but honestly I cant see that happening

<Dream> thank you

<Dream> I hope you and your daughter have a bright future ahead of you!

<Phoenix SC> we will. Don't worry about that

<Phoenix SC> also, I would like to ask you whether you'd like to exchange discord IDs

<Phoenix SC> so we can keep in touch even outside of playing Mimecraft

<Dream> that would be great

Clay can sense his gratitude even through the screen as well as a strong bond forming between the two of them.

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast turned a vow into a blood oath. Thy bond shall become the wings of rebellion and break the yoke of thy heart. Thou hast awakened to the ultimate secret of the Hermit, granting thee infinite power...

Clay exchanges his Discord ID with Phoenix SC over Mimecraft and Phoenix SC logs off for the last time. Clay logs off as well. Just then, his phone buzzes, and Clay smiles as he sees a notification from Discord that has just popped up.

*

11/16 – MONDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“Ever since we changed Gina’s heart, I’ve been coming down here more often in the evenings,” George says, boots crunching the crisp carpet of leaves.

“Really?”

“Yeah. It’s not a far walk either,” George says, nodding. They reach an outlook, one that grants them a magnificent view of the lake, the setting sun glowing in the distance as it dips beneath the horizon. A peaceful silence hangs over them as they bask in each other’s presence, with one of Clay’s arms slung across George’s waist.

“Have you even ridden on one of those boats?” George asks.

Clay scrunches his nose up. The last time he did... “Yeah. With Zak. Not the most pleasant experience.”

George cracks up at that. “I wonder why you even got on a boat with him in the first place. Must be some sort of art thing he’s got going on.”

Clay shudders at the memory.

“I’ve never ridden one before,” George says.

“Do you want to? Right now?”

“If you...if you don’t mind.” George gazes down at the tiny boats on the water, a certain sort of longing in his eyes. “And if they’re still open.”

Taking George by the hand, Clay leads him down the path, through the copses of trees and falling leaves. They approach the small rental hut by the lake and they pay for an hour's trip around the lake.

Clay rows the boat out into the middle of the lake, bobbing along with the weak current. Ducks swim beside them, webbed feet paddling along the water. George is looking up at the night sky, at the stars that are starting to come out.

"It's pretty," George says.

Clay glances up, then back at George. "It is."

"I'm really glad I met you, Clay," George says, meeting Clay's eyes. "I think you were the best thing that happened to me."

"Oh my God," Clay laughs, a hand on his forehead. "Why do you pick the cheesiest moments to say the cheesiest things?"

"I'm *trying*, you moron," George huffs. Clay leans forward and pecks him on the forehead.

"Aw, you know I still love you."

That brings a smile to George's face as he watches the ripples in the water, the glow of the streetlamps reflected off its surface. Clay can hardly express how George takes his breath away, how surreal he looks under the moonlight. Not just this instant, but every time Clay sees him, his heart does a little jig, body re-energized and once more ready to face the world.

Clay leans forward and lowers his head till his forehead rests against George's collarbone. He breathes deeply, drinking in as much of George's scent as possible as he shuts his eyes.

"Clay? What are you doing? You're gonna capsize the boat." George says that, but his arms come around Clay's shoulders firmly, holding him there.

"No I'm not." His voice comes out more subdued than he'd liked.

"I swear, Clay. You're gonna dump the both of us into the water."

Clay grins, lips against the crook of George's shoulder. "I can't if you keep hugging me like this."

George lets go of him and Clay trails kisses up his neck, along his jawbone before moulding his mouth against his. The kiss is no longer a clumsy smash of the lips with clattering of teeth. It is smouldering with passion, Clay and George dancing to each other's tune in complete harmony, as if having memorised each other's rhythm and beat. The sheer intimacy of it all clouds Clay's mind as his hand reaches over to cup George's cheek, running his chilly fingers down the side of his face, drawing him even closer.

George is the first to pull away, flushed face cute in the dim light, chest rising and falling with quick breaths.

Clay is the first to break the silence. "That was...that was the longest kiss we ever had."

George chuckles. "It was wild."

If time were to grind to a halt now, Clay wouldn't mind. If this moment could be preserved, frozen in a cage of ice, Clay wouldn't mind. If they can remain forever like this, sitting mere inches away

in a boat rocking with the rolling waves of the lake, beneath the blanket of stars, Clay wouldn't mind.

Yet, fate can be ever so cruel...

*

11/17 – TUESDAY – EVENING

“What are we doing here?” Floris asks, poking his head out from the bag, glancing around at Valentine's night scene. There aren't that many people here, considering that it's a weekday after all.

Clay lifts his head from his phone and stares straight ahead at the man he's come here to meet. Blade, with his back against the wall, fiddling with something on his own phone. He looks up when Clay approaches.

“You really took your time there.”

“Homework's a bitch,” Clay says, sighing. He's been stuck in the library since school let out, completing homework that was due that day.

“Maybe you should get better time management skills,” Blade says, shrugging. Ouch. No remorse whatsoever from this guy. “Anyway, let's head on over to Mementos.”

“Mementos? What for?” Floris asks.

Clay nods and jabs at thumb at his bag. “Can this guy come?”

Blade hums. “As long as he doesn't get in the way.”

“Wait, what the hell? Why's no one answering me?” Floris cries. “Why're you guys heading to Mementos?”

“Well, Blade's challenged me to this test of strength,” Clay says. “It's just a friendly competition between rivals.”

“Just the two of you?”

“Yeah. We can handle ourselves,” Blade says.

“We'll be fine if we just stay near the entrance. The Shadows are scared of us anyway.”

Floris still looks unconvinced, but he has no power to stop them as the duo head over to the train station.

*

“This should be a good spot,” Techno says. They have managed to find a deserted hall in the path of Qimranut, one floor down from the entrance. Dream agrees. No Shadows, the space is humongous and it is close enough to the entrance so that they can beat a hasty retreat should the Wither come knocking.

“Just try not to kill each other,” Fundy mutters, finding himself a corner to sit.

“Alright then,” Dream says, turning to face Techno. “Fundy, can you give us the cue to begin?”

“Uh...Three, two, one?”

In a flash, Dream and Techno are gone, bodies mere blurs in the dark of the room. Techno is so goddamn fast, leather shoes crunching the gravel as he draws his light sabre, drawing a wide arc in front of him. Dream brings out Koumokuten, throwing out a shield that blocks most of the attack. Techno's blade cuts a strip of green from Dream's sleeve, the piece of cloth fluttering to the ground.

Techno's Persona is Johanna, boasting powerful magic and unparalleled speed. Techno himself is well-versed in gunplay, given that he's a part of the force, and his reflexes and strength are nothing to scoff at. Put them together and they're a deadly combination.

Dream's jaw clenches as Techno goes on a relentless assault, slashing with a precision that Dream has never faced before. Never encountered it with any Shadow. With every swing, every stab, Techno draws blood. Nicks his ear, grazes his arm, slices off a piece of fabric. In spite of all this, he has never dealt a single fatal blow.

Dream parries his attack once again, hoping for just one opening to strike. He summons Horus, punting a giant white ball of energy at Techno. Techno merely waves his hand, Johanna manifesting at record speed, and within seconds is astride Johanna, veering away from the spot where the Megidola sphere would have crashed into.

No matter how many Megidola spheres Dream hurls at him, Techno dodges each and every one of them, weaving in and out between the barrage of projectiles. The screech of Johanna's wheels deafens Dream as he spins around to be met with a cyan ball to the chest.

Dream flies halfway across the room, landing harshly on the ground. Techno is on him in a second, light sabre raised. Dream flicks his wrist, changing from Horus to Koumokuten, stabbing his dagger at Techno's neck.

Techno stomps the ground, jerking to a halt with the dagger's blade inches from his throat. He trades his sabre for his ray gun, shooting a beam of light that just misses Dream's head, the blast crashing into the wall behind him, spraying bits of concrete and gravel everywhere.

Dream switches to Ananta, cloaking himself in a shower of blue. Techno leaps onto Johanna once again, ray gun shoved into its holster, both hands firm on the handlebars. Dream stops his sword with his pistol, Techno's crackling blade coming a little too close to his face for comfort.

Dream forces him back and fires a few shots, boosted by White Rider's power. One bullet catches Techno's shoulder, ripping his cloak and grazing his skin. Techno counters with a few blasts of his own, feet moving ever so quickly as if he's caught in an intense dance. Dream swaps his pistol out for his dagger right as Techno continues his flurry of sword slashes.

Dream ducks, Techno's blade going right over his head. Dream whips out his pistol and presses it to Techno's stomach, only for it to be kicked out of his hand before he can pull the trigger. Techno stomps on his chest, forcing the air out of Dream's lungs, stabbing his light sabre into the ground beside him.

“Not even...” Techno coughs. “Not even close.”

Dream's chest heaves. God, that was one heck of a workout. Techno lifts his foot off him and plucks his sword from the ground, sheathing it. He holds a hand out to Dream who takes it, pulling him to his feet.

“What the hell,” Dream mutters. How embarrassing. He’s been at it longer than Techno has. Way longer, in fact. He’d like to write this battle off as a fluke – his pride just cannot accept this loss – but deep within him, he knows he’s lost in a fair fight.

“Techno never dies.”

“Oh my God.”

Green light envelopes them, courtesy of Fundy. Dream’s wounds disappear, the pain along with it. Techno’s cape is repaired as well, threads sewn back together as if nothing had happened.

“I think you were pretty good too,” Techno says with a chuckle, “if I’m being honest.”

“Really?” Dream says, sighing.

“Yeah. Maybe if you trained a little harder...”

Dream laughs. “You seem to be really getting into this Phantom Thief stuff. Do you want to continue on with us? As the Phantom Thieves?”

Techno looks thoughtful. “I’ll think about it.”

That’s not a no. Did he change his mind about the whole disbanding thing? Hope flutters in his chest.

“Wanna hang out over billiards and darts next time?” Dream asks. “Back to our usual thing?” He holds a hand out to Techno, who takes it.

“As long as I’m not the one paying for it,” Techno returns. He pulls a single glove out of his pocket and tosses it at Dream. Dream catches and peers down at it. It’s one of the gloves that Techno always wears. Is he giving it to him?

"Ever heard of 'throwing down the gauntlet'? In the modern age, when you throw a glove at someone, that means you're asking them for a duel," Techno says. "Think of it as a promise you're making to me."

Dream meets Techno's eyes. His spirit of rebellion burns brightly behind them. "Very well," Dream says, the glove held tightly in hand. "I accept your challenge."

Techno grins.

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast turned a vow into a blood oath. Thy bond shall become the wings of rebellion and break the yoke of thy heart. Thou hast awakened to the ultimate secret of the Priestess, granting thee infinite power...

[Dream](#) watches as a shape flickers behind Techno. His Persona is no longer Johanna, but rather a woman clad in steel, armour shimmering under the gleam of Mementos’ lights. Wings extend from her back, rocket boosters attached at their ends. Anat stares down at him with folded arms before morphing into a glimmering sphere that sinks into Techno’s soul.

[“Guys.”](#) Fundy says slowly. When Dream glances around, he realizes that Fundy has already turned himself into the Fundybus. “Let’s go! Hurry!”

The rattle of skulls and chains has Dream leaping into the driver’s seat, with Techno glancing confusedly around, trying to figure out the source of the noise.

“Get in, Techno!” Dream shrieks. Techno huffs, throwing the door open and climbing into the passenger’s seat. Dream jams his foot on the accelerator and the Fundybus is off.

*

11/18 – WEDNESDAY – MORNING

“She’s really leaving?”

“Yeah, it’s been half a year already...”

Clay is seated between Darryl and George in the school assembly hall. Dr Montgomery is leaving today, and he had completely forgotten about it until this morning assembly.

After getting the students to quiet down, the deputy principal invites Dr Montgomery onstage. She strides up to the standing microphone, tapping it twice, then speaking into it with a voice loud and clear.

“It has been a pleasure listening to all of you, meeting with all of you and hearing your thoughts. Financial and relationship woes...I daresay you have some problems very similar to my own.” Dr Montgomery giggles. The students laugh.

“Jokes aside, I only have one thing to say to you, and that is if you encounter a problem much too difficult to solve on your own, much too painful to bear...” She wrings her hands, a sad smile on her face. “It is perfectly fine to escape your problems. I don’t want a single one of you to think that the unfair reality forced onto you is the only one you have to live in.”

There is chatter amongst the students. Clay folds his arms. George bites his lip.

“What I’m trying to say is that life is full of worries, and that you should not obsess over them,” Dr Montgomery says with a smile. “Your existence in this world is a miracle. All of you deserve to spend your days in happiness.”

Clay looks down at his shoes. Happiness, eh?

“I will be rooting for all of you, even after I’m gone,” Dr Montgomery says with a dainty fist pump. “Thank you for having me this year!”

The hall erupts into cheers and applause as Dr Montgomery steps off the stage. Despite being here for only half a year, she’s been very well-received. She must have helped so many people during her time here.

Clay heads back to his classroom with George and Darryl. Perhaps he should go see her when school lets out and ask about that research paper of hers. It’s probably going to be his final time seeing her after all...

*

11/18 – WEDNESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“Clay! Do you mind meeting me in my office for a while?”

Clay turns his head to see Dr Montgomery striding up to him, her lab coat flowing behind her. Floris ducks back into his bag.

“I had been looking for you too.”

“Great!” Dr Montgomery claps her hands together. “Today’s my last day here, so we won’t get many opportunities to talk after this.”

He follows Dr Montgomery into her office where he catches a whiff of steak. His jaw drops when he sees the two plates of beef on the table with a side of salad and spaghetti.

“My research paper is pretty much done. All that’s left is a little bit of fine-tuning,” Dr Montgomery says, shutting the door behind her with a click. “I must really thank you, Clay. Without you sharing your insights with me...I don’t think this paper would have come into being.”

Clay nods. Dr Montgomery laughs, noting the way he’s staring at the plate of steak with a watering mouth. Clay digs in while Dr Montgomery leans back against her chair, watching him eat with the most satisfied expression on her face.

“I’d like to express my gratitude to you. You as a student of Enderlands and as a Phantom Thief as well.”

Clay’s knife clatters to the table as he stops mid-chew. What did she just say?

“The title of my paper is: ‘Interpreting reality through cognitive science and the alteration of reality via external influence.’” Dr Montgomery cuts a piece of steak delicately. “The entire time that I was studying this topic, I constantly thought about its similarity to what the Phantom Thieves seem to be doing.”

“How so?” Clay asks, swallowing his piece of beef.

“I believe they infiltrate a ‘reality’ that exists solely for their target – a reality that is wholly separate from the one that the public recognizes,” Dr Montgomery says. “By accessing that world, they gain the means of permanently altering their target’s cognition. I think that is what you mean by the ‘change of heart’s you induce in your targets.”

Clay nods.

“Actually, I have a confession to make.” Dr Montgomery eats another piece of her steak. “I had witnessed the moment you came back out from an ‘individual’s reality’ like I had mentioned. You were with...Mr Armstrong and Mr Noveschosch, correct?”

Well then. There’s no hiding from her now.

“Shortly after that, Mr Krones’ heart changed, and I couldn’t help but notice that the three of you were somewhat affiliated with Mr Krones in some way.” She stabs a piece of lettuce. “I was half-convinced that the three of you were involved in some way.”

“What’s your game here?” Clay asks, narrowing his eyes.

“I have been studying cognitive science ever since I was a grad student,” Dr Montgomery says. “For years, I have been attempting to directly interact with a person’s cognition and address their suffering and despair.” She shakes her head sadly. “But for some reason, this has never been acknowledged in academia. Soon after that, I encountered the Phantom Thieves fresh from a mission.”

“I see. So you wanted our help.”

“Essentially, yes,” Dr Montgomery says with a pleasant smile. “That was partly the reason I approached the three of you in the first place. I hadn’t mentioned it until now because I didn’t want

to rouse your suspicions and make you doubt my motives.” She raises her head, gazing into Clay’s eyes. “Well, I think that’s all I’ve kept from you. Does this change your opinion of me now?”

“We had a deal,” Clay says sternly.

Dr Montgomery chortles. “I’m grateful you see it that way. Just so you know, I have no intentions of telling anyone about this. If you don’t believe me, you may change my heart as you see fit.”

She glances out through the window, at the trees swaying in the wind. “I’m going to stand up to our current reality. I swear I’ll use my research to make the world a better place.” She turns back to Clay. “Although, it’ll be likely through different means than how the Phantom Thieves reform society.”

“We all define justice differently,” Clay says. It’s as if a weight has been lifted from his heart. Dr Montgomery truly is a woman with a heart of gold. He’s honoured to have helped someone like her with her noble goal.

“You have a strong moral compass, never losing sight of your own definition of justice,” Dr Montgomery says. “It’s not like we will never see each other again, I’d like to thank you for everything up to this point.”

She extends her arm and Clay takes her hand, shaking it firmly.

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast turned a vow into a blood oath. Thy bond shall become the wings of rebellion and break the yoke of thy heart. Thou hast awakened to the ultimate secret of the Councillor, granting thee infinite power...

“I will follow my own path,” Dr Montgomery says. “And along the way, I wish to aid you as well, even if you may consider that to be meddling in your affairs.”

She and Clay finish up their food, a scrumptious meal that fills him right up. Clay heads for home straight after. Tomorrow is, indeed, a big day.

*

11/18 – WEDNESDAY – EVENING

Me: Is the calling card ready?

Zak: yep

Nick: im on the way back

Nick: moms at home right

Me: yeah

Eret: this will be our final mission as the phantom thieves

Eret: clay would you like to give a pep talk

Me: I thought I already did

Me: and its weird to do it over text maybe I’ll do it tomorrow

Harvey: lol

Eret: ok then

Me: everyone get a good nights sleep

Me: tomorrow will play out as per normal

Me: good night everyone!

Clay puts his phone back on the shelf. Nick has the calling card with him and tomorrow's the heist. He needs all the sleep he can get. All he prays for before as he closes his eyes is just one night of sleep without nightmares.

Just one night.

Chapter End Notes

Emperor arcana rank 8 -> 9 (eret)

Hermit arcana rank 9 -> 10 MAX (phoenix sc)

Proficiency +3 (crafting)

Priestess arcana rank 9 -> 10 MAX (technoblade)

Councillor arcana rank 9 -> 10 MAX (montgomery)

Fool arcana rank 6 -> 7 (Phantom Thieves)

Casino of Envy: Life Will Change

Chapter Summary

shadow armstrong boss battle + what comes after

Chapter Notes

finally

i was so hyped to write this

i was today years old when i found out that big q is only 4 months older than me lmao

dream smp spoilers (mexican l'manburg/el rapids storyline):

is it just me or is quackity really hot when he's arguing with dream in that whole blowing-up-eret's-castle stream and now sapnap's got 2 targets he wanna kill and it's like dream and techno AHHAHAH

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

11/19 – THURSDAY – MORNING

“What is this?” Mrs Armstrong shrieks with a piercing voice that can shatter windows. She hurls the calling card to the ground and grinds her heels on it. “The Phantom Thieves *dare* target me.”

“I just found it outside our doorstep this morning,” Clay says, straightening his posture. He’s never felt so nervous in his life. Is this how it felt like for the other Thieves as well when they handed over the calling cards to their targets?

“I will arrest the Phantom Thieves by today. Mark my words,” Mrs Armstrong says resolutely. Clay can almost see her Shadow self for a moment there, flickering in and out of existence with a smirk. When he blinks, it’s gone.

“Clay? We’re gonna be late,” Nick calls from the door. Clay rushes over to the shoe rack and puts on his trainers before running right out.

He can already *smell* the Palace security level from here.

*

11/19 – THURSDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

Dream pushes the door to the High Limit floor open. Sensing no hostile Shadows around, he emerges from the safe room with his fellow Thieves in tow. They run straight towards the scales that bridge over the ravine, granting them access to the Manager's floor.

The Treasure is in sight, a vague solid shape floating behind one Shadow Armstrong.

"She's been waiting for us," Navi says.

"Of course. After that whole dramatic announcement? With the calling card? Dare I expect any less?" Shadow Armstrong cackles. With a wave of her hand, the Treasure is gone. Dream's eyes widen. Where did it go?

"You have to play my game, little brats." Shadow Armstrong leers. "A game that's fair and square."

Fair and square, she says. Nothing about this casino had been fair. She had been holding all the cards in her hands the whole time.

Shadow Armstrong levitates, hovering above the floor and up the staircase at the far end of the room.

"I will meet you in the next room. Don't keep me waiting."

She disappears past a vault at the very top of the flight, laughing maniacally as she sashays past the doorway.

"Wait!" Sapnap shouts, taking off after her.

Without hesitation, the Thieves follow, scrambling up the stairs and past the doorway, finding themselves standing in a massive, featureless room. What the heck is this place?

["Behold!"](#)

The door behind them vanishes. Dream is nearly knocked off his feet by a sudden rumbling. The tiles around them fade away to reveal what seems to be a gargantuan roulette wheel, and they are standing right in the centre. Shadow Armstrong descends upon the battleground, fingers grazing the brim of her hat.

Dream steels himself, knees bent. As the ruler of this casino of lies, she must still have something up her sleeve. Otherwise, she wouldn't have challenged them so blatantly like this.

"Do not be so hasty," Shadow Armstrong says, a finger to her lips. "We must now play the game. However, there must be no violence while this wheel is being spun."

Play the game? Spinning the wheel?

Shadow Armstrong throws out her arm, a flippant wave of her hand. "Let the games begin!"

"To hell with your games!" Sapnap cries, dashing forward. "You're not my mom! You're *nothing* like her!"

"Wait, Sapnap! Don't attack her!" Fundy shouts.

It's too late. Sapnap slams his cudgel onto her head, jaw clenched, grip tight on his weapon. When he leaps away, however, the only damage he's caused is merely a dent in her hat, which she removes, her brown hair falling down past her shoulders, bangs curtaining her forehead.

“You’ve broken the rules,” Shadow Armstrong croons. “Haven’t I always told you that your impulsiveness would only hurt you in the long run, my son?”

“I’m not your s-“ Sapnap is cut off mid-scream, rendered silent by a thousand cuts to his body, strips of flesh torn from his arms and legs, neck and face. Dream watches in horror as Sapnap drops to a knee, eyes wide, breaths shallow.

“Look what happens to people who break the rules,” Shadow Armstrong says, watching with mirth as Bad heals the wounds up as fast as he can, knitting the gashes shut and diverting all of Sapnap’s leaking blood back into his body. “I think I’ve set a compelling example for you lot.”

“We’re going to have to play by the rules here,” Techno says. “Basically, she wants us to gamble.”

“Indeed,” Shadow Armstrong says, folding her arms. The roulette wheel continues to spin and spin and spin. Dream grits his teeth. The clacking of the wheel is getting on his nerves. A monitor appears over Shadow Armstrong’s head, with the words: “Bet HP” displayed in block letters.

“HP? Doesn’t that stand for hit points or something?” TapL asks.

“I don’t think it really matters what you bet,” Navi whispers. “The outcome will be the same anyway.”

“We should focus on figuring out how she’s going to cheat,” Eret says.

“Watch the ball closely. Got it.” Dream’s knees are bent, his eyes trained on Shadow Armstrong.

“Have you made your choice? How would you bet? Red or black? Between one and twelve? Thirteen and twenty-four? Or would it be between twenty-five and thirty-six?”

“It will land in a red pocket.”

“Red it is!” Shadow Armstrong spreads her arms and the ball is released onto the wheel. It whirrs and clunks, rolls and gyrates, before finally landing in a...a red pocket?

No, not a red pocket. A glint catches Dream’s eye and the ball tumbles into the adjacent black one.

“YOU LOSE” flashes across the monitor and several hundred cuts appear on Dream’s body. The pain is agonizing, as if he’s just been burned a hundred different places. He forces open an eye, watching as Shadow Armstrong restarts the roulette wheel. This time, the words “Bet Money” appears on the monitor.

Fundy’s magic works like a charm, closing Dream’s wounds in record time.

“Have you figured out the trick, Dream?” Eret asks.

There was a glint. Right before the ball switched squares. Dream knows he saw it. What could it mean?

“There’s a glass pane,” Dream says. “The glass panel activates when the ball falls into a pocket we want.”

“A glass pane?” Bad asks.

“Want me to shoot it?” Techno says, ray gun at the ready.

That’s the best course of action. Dream nods.

“The rest of us will keep her busy while Techno finds a spot to shoot from,” Dream says.

“Shadows are appearing too,” Navi says. “Might want to deal with them too.”

“What will it be this time?” Shadow Armstrong asks mockingly. “What bet would you place?”

They’re going to win for sure. Dream declares, standing amidst the wave of Shadows bleeding out from the floor around them, “Between thirteen and twenty-four!”

“Between thirteen and twenty-four it is!” Shadow Armstrong announces and the roulette wheel begins to spin again. Techno is already in position, watching the ball clatter and roll, bouncing between squares. It lands on a square with the number “14” glaring down at him.

Then, Dream sees the glint again. There it is. The glass pane!

A sharp crack shatters the glass before the ball can be pushed into the losing slot, dropping into the “14” square. Dream grins as the words “YOU WIN” spreads across the screen, and tokens rain from the ceiling, clanging to the ground.

Shadow Armstrong stares, dumbstruck, at the turn of events. Techno hops down from his vantage point at the top of the roulette, landing lightly with hardly a sound.

“Give it up,” Dream says, drawing his pistol and aiming it at her. “You’ve been cheating this whole time.”

“You dare accuse me of cheating?” Shadow Armstrong grows enraged. “*I rule the courts! I decide the verdict! I can never cheat!*”

Dream leaps back just as Shadow Armstrong is surrounded by a column of black flames, stretching to the ceiling. Dream throws an arm up to shield himself from the overwhelming release of energy. When the fire dies down, remnant smoke dissipating into the air, what emerges is truly what Dream would consider a monstrosity.

Shadow Armstrong no longer resembles a human but rather an alien life form decked out in thick armour. Her tail whips menacingly behind her as she roars, her voice sounding more animal than anything.

“Dream, watch out!”

Dream barely has time to react when Shadow Armstrong raises her arm – her arm that has turned into a *gatling gun* – and begins blasting, bullets ricocheting off the walls, the floor, flying everywhere. A bullet grazes Dream’s ear, a tiny pinprick of pain shooting through the side of his head. Another bullet smashes his shin and Dream bites his tongue in an effort to contain his scream. A coppery tang fills his mouth.

Bad lays a hand on his shoulder and sends a relaxing wave through his body, repairing his ear and leg as Shadow Armstrong reloads. Now’s their chance! Breaking free from Bad’s grip, Dream summons White Rider and fires a few shots, wisps of white trailing behind his bullets.

However, the attack proves to be in vain when she merely deflects them, including the barrage of electrified fireballs that Sapnap and Bad conjure. Just what is her deal?

“Let’s start the next round!” Shadow Armstrong shouts.

“Get back! Don’t attack!” Dream cries.

Eret's arrow of light barely misses her, stabbing the ground right next to her feet. Shadow Armstrong remains motionless as well, and it's only now that Dream realizes just how terrifying she looks. In addition to her metallic exterior, she has a brutish build, jaw full of snapping razor teeth. Not only does she have a gatling gun as an arm, but the other arm has transformed into an axe that she can swing around with wild abandon.

Before Dream can place his bet, the pockets of the roulette tear away, dissolving into dust, red and black now replaced by coloured symbols that Dream can't make heads or tails of. He glances back at Necronomicon hovering over them, high in the air.

"Those...those symbols represent the elements, Dream," Navi says. "We have to be careful here!"

Shadow Armstrong bellows, stomping the ground and the roulette begins to spin, the ball released. The ball rolls, bumping off the edges, clattering and twirling before it lands into a pocket with a green symbol depicting a swirl of some sort.

"Sapnap, get out of there!" Navi yells.

"Swap with Skeppy!"

Sapnap leaps backwards and Skeppy takes his place just in time for the group to be met with a raging tornado that engulfs everything in its path. Dream braves the attack, blades of wind slicing at his skin, drawing fresh blood.

It's only when the cyclone has disappeared, pouring the number of tokens that it has picked up from the ground onto them like hailstones that Dream dares open his mouth.

"Fundy, swap with Bad!"

Fundy and Bad change places, the former coming in with a bout of healing magic.

"Use Zio skills against her!"

Dream switches from White Rider to Atropos and sparks of electricity zip along the floor in jagged forks, encasing her in a cage of electricity. Shadow Armstrong screeches, body seizing up as a million volts travel through her.

With her trapped in that state, Dream would never have predicted that hail of bullets from her gatling gun. He swaps to Dakini, eyes wide as a bullet bounces off from between his eyes, falling harmlessly to the ground. Shadow Armstrong breaks free from her electric cage and slashes at them, heavy blade cutting through the air.

Dream grins as green light blossoms from beneath his feet. The way she swings her axe can never be compared to Techno's – much too reckless, too rash, missing the perfect precision in Techno's swordplay. Dream meets her axe head-on, strength boosted by Koumokuten, forcing her back despite her greater size.

With a wave of her arm, the roulette begins to spin once more, the ball released onto the wheel. Which symbol is the ball going to land on this time? Could it be the crimson flame? The azure snowflake? The purple spiral?

The ball comes to a stop in a pocket depicting white stripes. Dream has no idea what that element could be, but from Navi's gasp, it's nothing good.

"Physical and gun skills work best now!" Navi's words are rapid, flowing nonstop from his mouth.

“She’s gonna use Almighty attacks! Don’t get too close!”

Dream darts to the side, avoiding a single beam of light cutting the battlefield in half. He switches back to Dakini, dagger at the ready.

“Techno! Cover me!”

Techno swaps places with Skeppy and hops on Anat, her body clanking and morphing into what appears to be an aircraft. She soars into the air, taking Techno with her.

Dream rushes Shadow Armstrong and each of her white spheres are diffused by Techno’s Frei-charged bullets, giving Dream the unobstructed path he needs to run up to her and plunge his dagger into her chest. Using her stomach as a launching pad, he leaps away, black blood spurting in a wide arc as he plucks the blade from her body.

Shadow Armstrong roars in pain, firing her bullets randomly, her axe swings fizzling with white sparkles. Getting touched by either would mean a death sentence.

“I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you, I’ll kill you, I’ll kill you I’ll kill you lot!” Shadow Armstrong spins on her heels, firing a slew of missiles into the air that crash back onto the roulette, destroying everything in its path. A white sphere grazes Dream’s arm, burning off the entire length of his sleeve and leaving singed skin in its wake.

Dream jumps back, shoes scratching against the rough carpet of the roulette board, grinning as he ducks to avoid another sphere of white. He needn’t do anything anymore. Not when a faint shape hurtles towards her from behind, gun at the ready.

Two shots and Techno blasts both her arms off, her limbs bursting into dust. Shadow Armstrong falls forward and crashes into the ground, hissing and growling.

Dream puts the barrel of his gun to her head. “Don’t move or I’ll shoot.”

[Shadow](#) Armstrong obeys. She lies limply on the ground, subdued, and her monstrous form disappears. Dream removes his gun, and Sapnap walks up to her, dropping to one knee.

“Mom, are you alright?”

Skeppy and Eret head on over to the back to pick up the Treasure. Shadow Armstrong picks herself up, a defeated expression on her face as she looks up at her son.

“Mom, why?” Sapnap asks, shaking his head. “Ever since you’ve been assigned the whole Phantom Thieves’ case, you’ve kept away from us, neglecting your health and everything...”

“If I don’t...if I don’t arrest the Phantom Thieves,” Shadow Armstrong murmurs, “I will be fired with a stain on my name. For your sake, Nicholas, I cannot allow that to happen. But to think that my own son is a part of the group that I was chasing after.” She laughs. “What a cruel twist of fate.”

Sapnap looks torn, unsure of what to say.

“Hey, we got the Treasure,” Skeppy says, holding up a shining briefcase. “Come on, let’s go!”

“I...” Sapnap shakes his head. “I have to go, Mom. I promise we’ll save you.”

Shadow Armstrong smiles.

[“Whoa!”](#) Navi cries.

“What is it?” Dream peers over his shoulder, at the holographic screen pulled up in front of him.

“Shadows! And...and people? There’s a ton of them!” Indeed, from what Dream can see on his screen, there are dozens of men armed with guns, batons and walkie-talkies. Shadows, cognitive beings and, according to Navi, humans from the real world have made their way into the Palace, bursting through the doors, storming past the loads of cognitive guests.

“What the hell?” Fundy cries, leaping onto Dream’s shoulder.

“We have to get out of here as fast as we can,” Bad says.

“You guys...” Dream tucks his hands into his pockets. “You guys go on first. I’ll catch up.”

“What do you mean?” Navi’s head snaps over to him. “There are, like, a thousand guards there! This is foolish, Dream.”

“I’ll be fine,” Dream says. “Hey. Give me the Treasure. I’ll meet you guys outside.”

Eret tosses him the briefcase. Dream swings it over his shoulder. Navi frowns, fidgeting with his hands.

“I’ll be fine. Seriously,” Dream repeats. He leans down and gives Navi a light kiss on the lips. “You’ll be helping from the sidelines, right?”

Navi nods. “You’d better get out in one piece.”

“Right then,” Dream says with a wave. “Bye!”

He races down the staircase while the Thieves take a back door out. Dream heads down from the High Limit floor to the Member’s floor, then down to the Main Lobby, where he has a clear view of the crowd of cognitive beings below, briefcase in hand.

Now, it’s time for his great escape.

*

[Chips](#) clinging, cards scattering.

People screaming, alarms blaring.

Dream tucks a hand into the pocket of his emerald coat, the other having thrown the briefcase, the Treasure, over his shoulder. He stands atop a chandelier, swaying as he watches the chaos unfold below.

“Dream! Get the hell outta there!” Dream flinches at Navi’s unholy shriek. He is always ever so loud.

“Yeah, you’d better start moving, Dream!” Skeppy calls.

“Fine, fine,” Dream mutters, smirking at the arrival of those uniformed men, armed with batons and walkie-talkies, pushing their way through the crowd. Dream leaps from the chandelier in a death-defying move, firing off that grappling hook, the wire screeching as it wraps around the chain anchoring another chandelier to the ceiling.

“There he is! Get him!”

“Ooh, they’ve seen you now.” Dream can almost imagine Sapnap with a bowl of popcorn in his hands, reclining against an armchair and watching his melodramatic display as Dream soars through the air, low enough for his heels to knock the berets off those officers. The wire pulls taut, and Dream is sent flying into the air, doing a dramatic loop and landing safely on another chandelier. He withdraws the grappling hook and leaps onto a nearby balcony.

“Dream!” Navi shouts. “Behind you!”

Dream’s body moves on instinct, hurling the briefcase into the air and doing a backflip, effectively kicking the Shadow in the face, the tips of his shoes sending the Shadow’s mask flying and disintegrating in the air. The briefcase lands in his hand, and the Shadow transforms into Moloch, the demon preparing to launch fireballs at him.

This doesn’t look good.

Dream grabs the edge of his mask, the smiley face giving away to a dark, angry one, and a figure rises from behind him, dressed to the nines in a dapper fedora and a long, swaying coat that complements its tuxedo.

Use my power as you see fit to nullify the threat before you !

A thrust of a hand and a sphere of pure darkness later, the Moloch dissolves into ash, scattering into the air.

“Okay Dream, I’m sensing serious enemy readings around you right now,” Navi says. “Like...oh my God! Above you!”

Dream whips out his dagger and spins it between his fingers, hurling it at a Shadow like a dart hitting the bulls-eye, instantly killing it, the weapon hardly making a sound as it falls onto plush carpet. The other Shadow is stunned as Dream flashes it a grin. He snaps his pistol straight out from its holster and blasts at least ten holes in its amorphous body.

“Now’s your chance! Go!”

Dream meanders around, slotting his gun back into his holster and picking the dagger up. He wipes the blackened blood off it and sheathes the blade.

“Navi, you gotta tell me you love me first.”

Navi doesn’t play along this time.

“Just go! There are more coming, you idiot!”

Dream laughs. Navi can really scream sometimes. Sparing no more of his time, Dream hurries, sprinting up the stairs and into the staff-only area.

“Holy-” Dream stifles a gasp as he nearly runs right into another officer, throwing himself back and pressing his side against the wall, heart thundering in his chest as he waits for the officer to leave.

“You saw him? Where is he?”

Thump, thump, thump . The satisfying sound of heavyset rubber soles thundering against the tiled floor, running past Dream, totally missing him seemingly becoming one with the wall. The officer

throws the door open and rushes through, walkie-talkie in hand, and Dream takes his chance to barrel through the hallway.

Dream crashes through the door that opens up to a stairway, and he takes it, only to stop at the next floor and to find two guards standing there, speaking to each other, only falling silent when they realise just who they're looking at.

[“Adios.”](#) Dream holds up a hand and waves once before resuming his escape, running up the steps two at a time, the guard duo yelling into their walkie-talkies, pistols out. Dream ducks just in time for a bullet to miss his head, searing into the wall right next to him. God, if he'd just been one second later...

Dream slams into the next door with his shoulder, pain arrowing through his arm, only to find himself cornered, standing at a balcony with no other way out. Behind him are two guards who halt abruptly, pistols cocked and safety off, fingers on the trigger.

How's he gonna get out of this now?

“Give it up!” one of the guards shoot at the ceiling. A warning shot. Dream stifles a scoff.

Well, Dream's just going to have to take this situation into his own hands. In one quick move, catching both officers off guard, he leaps onto the banister and begins sprinting, careful not to slip, and not to get shot. Bullets sail past him, crashing into walls, leaving smouldering marks behind.

Dream reaches the end of the railing, standing right next to a colourful artwork of the casino owner on stained glass.

“See ya!” Dream calls, braces himself with the briefcase tucked against his stomach and pulls one of his most aesthetic stunts, if he does say so himself. Glass shatters all around him, technicolour shards raining all around him.

“DREAM!” Navi and Bad yell at the same time. Dream hopes Navi's not experiencing a heart attack.

“Now he's just trying to look cool,” Techno mutters.

Dream rolls on the ground, unharmed, the briefcase still safe with him. A beam of light blinds him, followed by more and more, sharp rays of light piercing his eyes. Lord, would it kill them to use dimmer lights?

Dream can hardly hear Navi or the others now, their distance from him a major factor in the static buzzing in his ears. He does what he does best.

Run.

He begins his sprint just as the officers converge, managing to make it to an emergency ladder conveniently dropped down to ground level. He ascends the ladder, snickering at the officers on his tail.

That is, until a foot meets his face.

Dream yelps and loses his grip on both the briefcase and the rung. He tumbles through the air, completely taken by surprise and lands harshly on his tailbone. Pain lances up his spine as an officer, or two, seizes him, clasp his wrists in handcuffs.

“You were sold out,” the burly officer informs him ever so courteously. “You gotta thank your teammate for this.”

Dream fixes him with a glare, but it’s not like the police can see his expression from behind the mask. Navi’s voice is completely absent now, as Dream is shoved into a police car, flanked by two officers, his mask having faded from his face, the officer’s last words ringing in his head.

You were sold out.

Chapter End Notes

tomorrow is the DAYYYYY

and i literally copied the last part of this chap off the first chap just that i changed it up a little and changed george's name to navi

Make Your Choice: 11/20

Chapter Summary

it's time to decide the fate of dream's story...

Chapter Notes

HELLO EVERYONE PLEASE READ:

At the end of this chapter, there will be 2 hyperlinks: 2 separate answers to Mrs Armstrong's question. It's up to you to decide whether this story will end here or whether it will continue. Don't click the Next Chapter button lmao

:)))

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The story will proceed very quickly from here on out. Saving is recommended.

Would you like to save?

Saving...

11/20 – FRIDAY – DAYTIME. Dream. Lv 55. Interrogation Room.

*

[11/20 – FRIDAY – DAYTIME](#)

“So that’s how it happened...”

Mrs Armstrong leans back against her seat, touching her chin. Clay nods. She retrieves her file and turns to the next page. Clay’s eyes widen. He knows those faces.

“I am going to read out a list of people whom we suspect your accomplices to be,” Mrs Armstrong says. “I would like you to confirm whether they were working with you or not.”

Clay’s eyelids are heavy, his head hazy. For some reason...he can’t seem to dredge up his memories...

“First. Nicholas Armstrong, my...” She hesitates. “My son, and the person you live with and a student who studies in Enderlands High, same as you.

“Second. Darryl Noveschosch. He also studies in Enderlands High, in the same class as you. He and his friend were victims of Peter Kronos’ abuse, your first target.

“Third. Zak Ahmed. While he does not study in Enderlands High, he was affiliated with Isabelle

Marion, your second target, as her student who suffered injustices by her hand.

“Fourth. Eret. The Student Council President of your school, he was involved in a string of cases regarding the Kris’ Family that targeted students along Valentine Hills, your third target.

“Fifth. George Davidson. A student of Enderlands High in the same class as yourself. He lives with his sister after losing his mother and brother.

“Sixth. Harvey Lee. Also a student of Enderlands High, he was the son of Andre Lee, your fifth target. However, his father had died by this...this Black Mask’s hands.

“Seventh. Blade. He does not study at your school, but you have met up with him quite a number of times despite having no obvious affiliation with each other.”

Mrs Armstrong leans forward, sliding her file towards him for the last time, the faces of his beloved Thieves, minus Floris, staring back up at him.

“Tell me. Are these the names of your companions?”

>> *“That’s right.”*

>> *“No they’re not.”*

Chapter End Notes

HELLO PEOPLE WHO DID NOT READ BEGINNING CHAPTER NOTES:

Just above this note, there are 2 hyperlinks: 2 separate answers to Mrs Armstrong's question. It's up to you to decide whether this story will end here or whether it will continue. Don't click the Next Chapter button lmao

:)))

This Is Where Your Justice Ends

Chapter Summary

this is the story you chose!

Chapter Notes

"this is where your justice ends"

11/20 – FRIDAY – DAYTIME

“Thank you,” Mrs Armstrong says with a gentle smile on her face. She closes her file, slipping the folder back into her leather bag and hoisting it onto her shoulder. “I’ll make sure to get you a lighter sentence.”

Clay’s head hurts. He can hardly focus on anyone or anything. His vision blurs, his ears begin to ring again. Are these the side effects of the drugs?

He watches as Mrs Armstrong’s lips move, saying something that he can’t quite understand. She takes her leave, striding out of the room and leaving Clay with the lone guard who refuses to even look at him. All that’s left on the table is a white iPhone, the apple symbol on its back staring at him, as if mocking him.

Mocking him...for what?

Another stab of pain lances through Clay’s head.

Did he...forget something?

He hears sounds outside. Footsteps. Conversation. A familiar voice.

A voice he knows all too well.

“You were sold out.”

Clay clutches his head. His memories are scrambled, pieces floating about like slips of paper in a lottery box. The door swings open just as his senses return to normal.

He looks up, meeting eyes with a familiar someone, a pistol in hand. With a single shot, he silences the only guard in the room and strides over to where Clay is seated.

The gun cocks against his forehead, icy steel of the barrel an excellent mimic of the kiss of death. Clay shudders as, once again, he meets his eyes. A triumphant smile sneaks across that man’s face, a smile tinged with a hint of sorrow.

“This is where your justice ends, Dream.”

A sharp bang resonates throughout the room.

Then nothing.

Nothing but a cold abyss.

~FIN~

[Would you like to return to your previous save?](#)

The Phantom Thieves Are No More

Chapter Summary

this is the story you chose !

Chapter Notes

"the phantom thieves are no more"

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

11/20 – FRIDAY – DAYTIME

“I see. So you won’t sell your friends out no matter what I say,” Mrs Armstrong says, a little annoyed, but also impressed.

Clay’s head still spins, but there is a little detail he remembers more clearly now. A detail that had been all jumbled up in his head. He gestures to the white iPhone sitting ever so innocently on the table.

“This...” Clay croaks, throat parched. “Give this to the traitor.”

“The traitor?” Mrs Armstrong looks confused. She holds up the phone. “This phone?”

It was the phone that Clay was holding onto when he was arrested, given to him by one of his teammates. He needs Mrs Armstrong to hand it to the traitor. The traitor who is going to execute his own plan today, in a matter of minutes.

“Actually, you don’t have to give it to him. You just need to show it.”

“But who is the traitor?” Mrs Armstrong asks, shaking her head. “You haven’t given me a definitive answer.”

“I’ve already told you.”

Mrs Armstrong thinks for a moment, then nods. “Very well. I will show this to the traitor whom you speak of.”

Clay smiles. It’s been so long since he’s done that he’s almost forgotten what it feels like. “Thank you.”

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast turned a vow into a blood oath. Thy bond shall become the wings of rebellion and break the yoke of thy heart. Thou hast awakened to the ultimate secret of the Empress, granting thee infinite power...

With that, Mrs Armstrong picks her bag up and leaves, taking her files and the phone with her. Clay clasps his fingers in front of him and waits.

[“Ah,](#) you are...”

“Mrs Armstrong, correct? Nick’s mother?” George asks, dressed smartly in a business suit, both hands tucked into his pockets.

“Yes, that’s quite right. The prosecutor in charge of the Phantom Thieves’ case as well,” Mrs Armstrong says. “May I know who you are?”

“George Davidson,” George says, pulling out a badge. “I’m with the Special Investigations Unit.”

Mrs Armstrong pulls out a phone, which George stares strangely at. For some reason, he feels like he’s seen that phone before... “Is this yours?”

George tilts his head in question before a wave of nausea overcomes him. “No. It’s not.”

“I see. Sorry for taking up your time,” Mrs Armstrong says. “I will get going now.”

George watches as she walks down the corridor and rounds the corner. What was that all about? Well, it’s no matter. George glances back down the direction of the interrogation room, his heart beating at impossibly fast speeds. Behind that door, sitting within that room, is the man that he has been ordered to kill.

George’s fingers touch the grip of his pistol. He’s done this so many times. He’s done it more times he can count over the past one year. Put a gun to the foreheads of the Shadows begging for mercy. Stabbing them through the chest, watching them burst into dust instead of thousands of butterflies.

So why is his hand shaking? Why does the thought of doing, once again, what he had done to tens of others faze him? Why does the idea of shooting that man straight in the face unnerve him so?

George stalks over to the room, the guard outside nodding. He’s one of Singh’s men who’s in on the plan. He pushes the door open for George to enter, revealing Clay in all his glory, sitting at the table with a stunned expression, eyes wide and lips tight.

[George’s](#) heart clenches.

No.

His grip tightens on his pistol.

Don’t look at me like that.

George walks forward, footsteps ringing out in the otherwise-silent room. The other guard in the room watches him quietly. This one isn’t affiliated with Singh. He’s nothing more than a clueless underling of the higher-ups. A disposable pawn on a chessboard.

I can’t falter here.

George shoots a bullet through the guard’s forehead. He does not even flinch at the sharp crack of the shot, does not even feel a single ounce of remorse as the guard drops dead at his feet.

Not now, not ever.

Clay watches him with those green eyes of his. Those beautiful green eyes, uncharacteristically

empty, void of any sort of emotion.

How strange. George would have expected an outburst, perhaps, of anger. Or fear of certain death.

Please.

The cold barrel of the gun parts Clay's hair and presses against his forehead. George can hardly breathe, his chest constricted. Yet, in spite of the apprehension, excitement bubbles up within him. This is the invincible Dream, the invincible leader of the Phantom Thieves now rendered utterly defenceless before him.

Clay still stares up at him with those expressionless eyes. Anger lances through George. Why is he so reserved? Why doesn't he just...react? Just scream it out? Let loose what he's been keeping hidden in the deepest recesses of his heart? How can Clay, even in the face of death, keep ever so calm?

George curls his finger around the trigger. The tension has seeped from his body, replaced with a sense of liberation. Just kill the leader of the Phantom Thieves and be done with it. A triumphant grin spreads across his face, eyes lighting up with glee.

"This is where your justice ends, Dream."

Bang!

Blood splatters everywhere. Clay slams back into the chair, rivulets of red trickling down the sides of his face, limbs hanging at his sides. George slips the smoking pistol into Clay's hand. It's got to look like a suicide. An honourable death at his own hands. George spins on his heels and leaves the room, shutting the door with a click. His job here is complete.

He strides down the hallway. This would be his first and final time walking these whitewashed walls, bathed in its chilly atmosphere. Without their leader, the Phantom Thieves are hereby dissolved.

*

[11/20 – FRIDAY – EVENING](#)

"The leader of the Phantom Thieves has been detained yesterday by the authorities."

Zak's eyes widen, paintbrush dropping from his grip. He whirls around to face Darryl who is lying on his bed with a book in hand and wearing a solemn expression.

"The Phantom Thieves have been causing nothing but trouble to the state all this while. They ought to be punished to the fullest extent of the law."

Harvey stares out the window of his sedan, eyes focused on the giant television affixed to a skyscraper, with the Phantom Thieves' logo splashed onto its screen.

"They are the textbook definition of terrorists. Forcibly changing someone's heart is not something to be celebrated. It is something to be feared."

Eret's pen is poised in the air, eyes trained on the news anchor on his phone as she continues to speak.

"Perhaps it could have been the stress, or perhaps it could have been the shame of being caught,

but...”

Blade glances up at the television in the police station, throwing his coat over his shoulder as he prepares to head home for the day.

“The leader of the Phantom Thieves has committed suicide and the remaining Thieves have scattered. They will no longer be a threat to our society.”

Gina chews on a straw as she watches the livestream from her own computer, sipping at her boba tea, leaning against the backrest of her chair.

“Without a leader to unite its members, we are certain that we can remain safe from the clutches of the Phantom Thieves.”

Nick stands in front of an electronics store, Floris poking his head out from his bag as they watch the news play out in front of them with the most surprised expression on their faces.

“Holy shit,” Floris mumbles.

A grin slowly spreads across Nick’s face.

“We got ‘em.”

*

[Clay](#) awakens to a blue ceiling. His head is still pounding. His limbs are sore. God, he wants to snuggle back into his pillow and go back to sleep...Instead, he pulls himself to his feet and staggers over to the door of the jail cell where Igor sits with his fingers clasped.

“It appears that you have been killed,” Igor says, fingers tapping against his desk, the clacking grating on Clay’s ears. “How will you surmount this hardship?”

Clay clutches at his head. The drugs have done a number on his system. Igor snaps his fingers, and all of a sudden, Clay’s mind clears. He remembers now. Remembers the memories he had forgotten. It’s as if a fog has been lifted in his head.

“Now, recall, my Trickster,” Igor says with the same placid smile. “Recall the events that are crucial to your survival.”

*

“You know, I’ve been thinking,” Floris says. Clay shifts his weight from one foot to the other. “About...something strange.”

“Something strange?”

“You remember that day at the park cleanup? When we first met George?”

“Yeah?” Clay narrows his eyes. What is Floris talking about?”

“Remember when I told you he was colourblind?”

“Yes?” A sinking feeling plagues Clay’s stomach.

“He responded, didn’t he? He responded.”

“He...?” Clay shakes his head. “I don’t remember. But even if he did, what...” His eyes go wide. “No...”

“He did. I’m sure of it. Only people who’ve gone into the Metaverse before can hear me,” Floris says stubbornly. “Moreover, he knew something he didn’t too, back when he ‘awakened’ his Persona in Gina’s Palace. He called you by your codename even though you didn’t tell him until we began the infiltration.”

“What do you mean, Floris? What are you saying?” Clay’s breathing quickens, his heart pounding. Floris cannot possibly mean what he thinks he means.

“I’m saying that George could very well be the Black Mask,” Floris says. “If that’s so, then everything makes sense. Every single thing. Even how Gina found us.”

“How Gina found us?”

“Think about it. She must have found out about us using her technological know-how considering how she never leaves her room before joining us. I’d say someone’s phone was bugged, Clay.”

“Bugged? But you said that she never leaves...” Realization dawns on Clay. He can hardly move, frozen to the spot. The evidence is staring at him right in the face, but he just...he refuses to believe it. There’s no way that he can be the Black Mask. No fucking way.

“Clay, I know-“

Clay grunts.

“We should keep our guard up around him,” Floris says. “I don’t know what he’s planning, associating with us like that.”

Clay drops his gaze. That information hit hard. Even now, he doesn’t want to believe it. Doesn’t want to believe that one of his friends is...

“Hey! Are you coming?”

“There’s something I need to talk to you about.”

“What is it?” Clay asks, leaning closer to the computer screen.

“First of all, take a look at this,” Gina says, pulling up a window. Upon reading the lines of words, Clay realizes that it’s a transcript.

“Did you get this from your brother’s phone?”

Gina nods, wheeling away slightly to look up at him. “How’d you know?”

“Because we suspect him too,” Floris says. “We just didn’t have hard evidence.”

“I see.” Gina turns back to her computer. The message in the transcript is clear: this person has to kill the leader of the Phantom Thieves and force the rest to scatter, to be picked off one by one in the shadows. The leader will be killed during questioning and reported to have committed suicide. The continued mental shutdowns will be blamed on the Phantom Thieves in hiding, with the public none the wiser.

The perfect crime.

“Gina...”

“I don’t want George to do this. I can’t let him sully his hands with...I just can’t let him kill anyone,” Gina pleads. “Please, you have to stop him.”

Clay shifts his weight from one foot to the other. “When’s he planning on doing this?”

Gina bites her lip. “On November twentieth.”

“Then that doesn’t leave us a lot of time to come up with a plan,” Floris muses.

“Gina, I’d like you to continue providing us with information about George’s actions. As much as you can gather,” Clay says. He exhales loudly, nostrils flaring. “We’ll let you know of a plan as soon as we can think of one.”

“Thanks,” Gina says, nodding. “Thank you so much. Really.”

“It’s no problem,” Clay says with a wave of his hand. “I won’t die that easily, and I won’t let George dirty his hands any more than he already has; that, I can promise you.”

Clay leaves before George even returns...which is a good thing. It’d be hard to explain why he’s still here when he should have left with the rest ages ago.

He shivers as a chilly breeze whips by him. God, he should have brought a scarf.

With this new revelation, it is, perhaps, time to call for an emergency meeting with the Thieves... minus the traitor, of course.

*

Clay returns from his sea of memories, to meet Igor’s eyes once again.

“It is, perhaps, time for you to return to your present,” Igor says with a chuckle.

Clay thanks him for the gift and heads back to bed, laying his head on the lumpy mattress and he shuts his eyes, willing himself to fall asleep.

*

When Clay opens his eyes next, he’s back in that interrogation room, sitting at the tables, elbows still propped up on it.

He smirks.

Well, it looks like George didn’t show at all.

Chapter End Notes

CONGRATULATIONS! the story will continue because dream survived the ordeal :)

also, here's the cipher for those few scenes:

A = D, B = I, C = O, D = E, E = P, F = W, G = Y, H = M, I = K, J = B, K = A, L = Q, M = U, N = G, O = R, P = F, Q = T, R = Z, S = X, T = J, U = L, V = S, W = N, X = C, Y = H, Z = V

The original letter = the letter i replaced it with

Some hints that george was the black mask other than the evidence mentioned in the chapter:

-> "Shadow" is Anubis. C.N.B. provided a VERY VERY good analysis into this (even deeper than what i had intended) on chapter 72! Dear C.N.B if you're reading this i couldn't have said anything regarding how good of a point u made since IT WOULD HAVE GIVEN GEORGE AWAY. not solid evidence but a little teaser/hint for anyone who noticed :)

-> George never accepted his "Shadow" (which is, tbh, just a cognitive being but makes for a teaser i guess for those who played persona 4?) on purpose

-> for people who played/watched p5/p5r: isnt he too comfortable using his persona and skills as soon as he got them? Oracle/Navi, george's counterpart, never got those skills until much later in the game and the only reason she can summon ballistae when she was first introduced is because it's her own palace

-> Last picture in Gina's palace, george is depicted wearing a suit. No time with the PT was he ever shown wearing a suit but for the sake of his job and meeting with the high-ranking govt figure he does. Side note: george mentioned that he has to make money for both himself and gina yet is never shown working

-> george never went to the hawaii trip partly because of gina, and partly because of his job as an assassin. Granted techno, tubbo and possibly fundy are mighty suspicious because of this as well but suspicion around dream, sapnap, bad, skeppy, eret and tapl should have cleared up. Honestly i never noticed it in the game lol that since akiren, ryuji, ann, makoto, yusuke and haru (and "kasumi" for royal) were on the hawaii trip that they could not be the black mask

-> how did george carry out the kill at the end of andre lee's palace? well it was mentioned that dream saw the thieves climbing into the fundybus after stealing his treasure but never once did i mention that it was "all" of the thieves. George was heard yelling at Eret to step on it, but was George actually there? Don't forget that he had long-distance communication powers. Moreover, george ending up "thrown a distance away from the rest of the thieves"? Makes sense if u think about the fact that he had to escape by himself, probably ending up at a slightly different location from everyone else...how did he escape by himself? Remember that scene at the safe room where george said he was cold? Dream tossed him his coat and george could have just stolen a goho-m...

-> for those who played p5r, george's s link was the only one out of all the other party members who was at exactly level 8 by 11/20, in accordance with the traitor's...

Empress rank 9 -> 10 MAX (mrs armstrong)

The Plan: Explained

Chapter Summary

the thieves explain the plan

Chapter Notes

the most big brain plan i've heard of for a long long time. because of the circumstances of my version of the story, some parts of the plan are a little...twisted. i would advise suspension of disbelief here...

pls ask questions in the comments section if u dont get it i'll try to explain as best as i can. the plan is explained in bullet points in the end notes too!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

11/20 - FRIDAY - DAYTIME

The phone pings. Mrs Armstrong stares down at the screen, at the slew of messages that have suddenly appeared.

Unknown Number: greetings

Unknown Number: this is the phantom thieves

Unknown Number: there is an important matter that we need to discuss

Unknown Number: it concerns the man you had just passed in the hallway

The Phantom Thieves? Mrs Armstrong grits her teeth. What kind of game are they playing at here?

Unknown Number: he is a killer

Unknown Number: he intends to kill clay

Unknown Number: however you cannot stop him

Unknown Number: you may only save clay

What is that supposed to mean? That boy is a killer? Clay is going to die by his hands? Mrs Armstrong wants to scoff. That's impossible.

She frowns. Or is it?

Unknown Number: only you can save him

Unknown Number: the killer will not walk the same way as you to leave this building

Unknown Number: you are free to return to the room and retrieve clay

Unknown Number: his fate lies in your hands

Unknown Number: this has been the phantom thieves of hearts

Unknown Number: thank you

The messages are no longer coming in. Mrs Armstrong's eyes dart to the signal indicator at the corner of the phone. There *is* no signal, for some odd reason. That's strange. She is sure that there was some internet connection down here while she was in that dark room. She shakes her head in an attempt to remove the inconsistency nagging at her.

She doesn't want to believe it. No one dares to kill in a police station! How is that boy going to pull it off?

And yet, something about those text messages instills a sense of fear into her.

What if the Phantom Thieves aren't lying? What if that boy really does want to do Clay in?

In any case, Mrs Armstrong thinks, striding down the hallway that she came, it can't hurt to take some time and check up on him...

*

11/21 – SATURDAY – MORNING

“I’ve dealt with the leader of the Phantom Thieves, Father.”

George is staring down at his sneakers as he leans against the wall of the Valentine Hills station, phone in hand.

“Good,” comes the deep voice on the other end. “You’ve done well.”

“What about the rest of the Thieves?”

“They will be...*eliminated* in due time. Do not be impatient, my son.”

George bites his lip, unsure of how to respond.

“Why the silence?”

“You will keep up your end of the bargain, correct?” George asks.

The man laughs. “Naturally. So long as you continue following my orders.”

George grits his teeth. As long as he continues following orders. Like one of his father’s many puppets. Stretching from the police in various precincts around the city to high-ranking officials in governments, his father has complete control over most sectors of the political world, as well as a couple of other private companies.

George hates to admit the power his father has over him. That forced his hand. His finger. To pull the trigger and...

“I expect greater things from you, George,” the man says. “Do not let me down.”

George rubs at his wrist, still remembering the splash of blood from that assassination. That man's limp body leaning against the chair, blood dripping from his face. Each drop plopping to the ground mockingly. Tauntingly.

He's dead, George reminds himself. He's dead, and the one who killed him was George himself.

George pretends that there isn't a hollowness in his chest, an unsettling sense of emptiness. He spots a familiar figure – Darryl, it seems – heading towards a platform with a hoodie thrown over his head. He wonders how the rest are doing, learning about the death of their fellow leader. The Phantom Thieves' chatgroup has been particularly quiet lately. He cannot fault them, however. Grief takes a while to overcome. George should know.

He's received a few messages from Nick and Harvey, and even a voice call from Eret, asking whether he'd like to talk, seeing as he should be the most distraught learning of that man's death. George had politely declined. He has nothing to do with that man anymore. Nothing besides these unnecessary lingering emotions that will disappear in due time.

Now, he just has to execute the final part of his plan and for once, he would feel that his life has meaning.

*

11/21 – SATURDAY – DAYTIME

“Oi.”

Floris hops onto Clay's chest, the latter wincing, shoving him off as his bruise throbs from under his hoodie.

“Please don't do that when I'm all sick and injured and shit.”

“Oh, sorry.” Floris sounds genuinely apologetic. “I thought you'd like to know that Eret brought cake. And Darryl baked muffins. Zak even painted a portrait of you.”

“That last one is a lie.”

Floris laughs.

“They're all waiting downstairs now. Minus Gina, though. Can you walk?”

“I'm fine.”

Clay wobbles down the stairs, his head pounding. He wants to curl back up under his blankets, to sleep this fever away, but he certainly cannot refuse the call of his Thieves who have specially come to visit him.

“Yo!” Nick waves to him from the dining table, where Mrs Armstrong is entertaining the Thieves with a large spread on the table, complete with a sponge cake Eret brought and a huge box of muffins on the table.

“You're alive!” Harvey and Zak cheer, the former with his fist pumped into the air. Blade stands to the side, offering him a well-meaning smile. Clay offers them a tired grin, staggering down the staircase with Floris' help.

“How are you feeling?” Mr Armstrong asks, poking his head out from the kitchen, clad in an apron

with a spatula in hand. A delicious aroma drifts from within, a smell for sore...uh...noses.

Darryl leads Clay over to an empty seat, the latter sniffing as he flops down unceremoniously into it. Already, he's beginning to feel all better; his mind is clearer and his limbs don't hurt as much anymore.

"Never did I imagine that my own children are part of the group that I was chasing after," Mrs Armstrong says with a sigh. "To think that you had been operating under my nose for half a year now..."

"Sorry." Clay sniffs, unable to meet her eyes. She had been the one to ferry him out of there, after all. Mr Armstrong drove them back, away from the watchful eyes of roaming police officers. He owes her his life. He really does. More than once now.

"We...we apologize for the stress we've caused you," Eret says, lowering his gaze.

The mood has gone solemn, a looming guilt hanging in the air.

"I have no intention of selling any of you out, by the way," Mrs Armstrong says with a slight laugh. She's more cheerful now than she ever was. Cheer that, perhaps, comes with the confirmation of the Thieves' identity. "If they think that I will arrest my own sons they've got another thing coming."

Warmth bubbles up in Clay's chest.

Mr Armstrong returns with the final dish, a plate of steamed lobster which looks simply delectable. With that, they dig in. The food is amazing, a far cry from what they served in prison. He eats till he's stuffed, not a single scrap of food left on his plate.

"I'm still concerned how you managed to get him out of there," Mrs Armstrong says, leaning back against her chair. "I had clearly seen that George boy walk by me. If he was going to kill Clay, then..."

"Oh, that." Nick swallows his food.

"About the plan..." Clay scratches his head. "I can't quite remember about it too. The drugs and all...they screwed with my brain."

"Language," Darryl huffs. His tone softens. "We can explain it to you if you'd like?"

["Basically,](#) we made use of the Metaverse," Zak says. Nick explains briefly about the other dimension to his mother, who nods in understanding. Clay is somewhat impressed.

"Okay, so we knew that George is going to kill Clay after you were done interrogating him, right? Well, the thing is, if he somehow escapes detection, Clay's just gonna get hunted down again and this time he'd be incredibly vulnerable."

"So we were thinking that we're going to have to make George *think* he killed him, but what George really killed was a cognitive Clay," Harvey continues.

"A cognitive Clay?" Mrs Armstrong asks. Clay nods. He vaguely remembers that part.

"Something like that," Eret says. "Because we made use of your Palace coordinates, the Metaverse would bend to the cognition of the Palace ruler, which was you. Essentially, we realized that there would be a cognitive version of Clay in that interrogation room in the Metaverse after you're done

interrogating him.”

“Why’s that?” Mr Armstrong asks. “Sorry, I’m a little confused about all this…Metaverse thing.”

“So you know how Nick’s mom was interrogating Clay? Yeah, that was still in the real world,” Darryl says. “So she would think that Clay would still be sitting there, in that interrogation room. In the Metaverse tied to her cognition, there would be a cognitive Clay in that spot since Clay didn’t exactly enter the Metaverse.”

“And the room is in the police building,” Blade says. “When we entered the Metaverse using your Palace as coordinates, we realized that there’s this police station near the casino that is exactly the same as the real one since your distorted cognition didn’t extend that far. And on the same tangent, you didn’t view us as threats, and our clothes didn’t change.”

“It was crucial, because then George wouldn’t have suspected anything,” Eret says.

“Okay, so the more confusing part comes when you had to play your part, Mrs Armstrong,” Harvey says. “To be honest, I don’t quite get it either.”

“This was all Eret’s and Blade’s idea,” Clay says, eyeing him.

Blade clears his throat. “We just needed to find a way to bring George into the Metaverse without him realizing. And how we enter that world is through this app on our phones.”

“Is that why you had me show that phone to him?” Mrs Armstrong’s eyes widen, staring at Clay. Clay nods.

“Our skilled hacker could access the app remotely from her room, despite the distance,” Clay says. “All she needed to do was to be able to access the bookmarked location, which was your Palace, to allow you guys to enter the Metaverse.”

“And that phone we asked you to show him? It was bugged with a tracking device,” Blade says nonchalantly. “That’s so we could track when you pass each other in the hallway. We tried it out in the Metaverse and as it turns out, the device still worked. We could still figure out where both of you guys were.”

“Both of us?” Mrs Armstrong asks.

“Yeah. George’s phone was bugged too,” Clay says. They didn’t use Gina’s phone in the end and stuck with Clay’s, since Clay’s phone had the Meta-Nav installed.

“When I met up with George in the hallway, we were still in the real world,” Mrs Armstrong says with a contemplative expression on her face. “After that, I walked back to the elevator, but I didn’t get on it. So while that was happening, George had walked into the Metaverse-version of the interrogation room and killed the cognitive Clay.”

“Yeah,” Blade says. “Do you remember the text messages that you received just before you got on the elevator?”

“Yes?”

“For text messages and stuff like that, the phones can’t receive any signal,” Darryl says. “We had Gina pre-programme the messages into the phone beforehand.”

“Wait, who’s this Gina?” Mr Armstrong asks.

“George’s sister. She’s been helping us with her hacking and coding skills a lot,” Clay says proudly. “She’s the one who managed to get this all set up, you know.”

“We couldn’t let George see you going back to the room, because then you’d stumble upon a murder straight after he left and you’d be his next target,” Eret says. “We had to come up with a way such that you guys wouldn’t meet each other once you’ve started walking back to the room, and George back to the elevator.”

“So we thought: ‘why not let you guys pass each other but in different dimensions?’” Zak says. “I came up with that one, okay. I’m a genius.”

Mr Armstrong chuckles.

“The intent of the messages was not only to make you turn around to get Clay back, but also for you to stop and pause for a moment while George is coming out of the room. We had you wait in the hallway after the corner so that George wouldn’t see you when he came out and walked down the same hallway,” Blade says.

“You can only exit the Metaverse from the same point you entered,” Clay says. “When George reached that point where he talked to you and left the Metaverse, you were still in there reading our messages. When you walked back to the point where you had entered the Metaverse and exited it, he had already turned the corner and headed up the elevator.”

“We pulled a perfect switcheroo,” Darryl says, clapping his hands.

“And then you managed to help get our Clay out of there,” Nick says.

“But a huge part of this plan required my assistance,” Mrs Armstrong says. “Yet, I knew nothing about this...this big scheme going on right under my nose.”

“Yeah, that was actually the scariest part of our plan,” Harvey says with a laugh. “We didn’t know whether you’d cooperate. Whether you’d agree to showing George the phone, or whether you’d even read the messages or whether you’d turn around and go help Clay.”

“But in the end, it all worked out,” Darryl says with a shrug.

[“Amazing.”](#) Mr Armstrong says, shaking his head. “I didn’t understand most of it, but it seems like you kids have been through a lot.”

“Especially our leader,” Nick says, glancing over to Clay, whose head is ducked, stuffing a piece of lobster into his mouth. “Those drugs and beatings and shit. Man, I didn’t know officers could do that.”

“They shouldn’t,” Mrs Armstrong says, a tinge of guilt in her voice. “It’s saddening that such things happen and I wasn’t...aware of it.”

“Honestly, there’s nothing you can do about it,” Clay says. “The higher-ups will just shut you down.”

“He’s right. Our real enemies are those in power,” Nick says.

“And on that note, Blade has a proposition for us,” Eret says, “but we should think on this idea tomorrow. I think Clay deserves some rest.”

Clay shoots Blade a smirk. “What happened to disbanding the Phantom Thieves?”

“I said I’d consider it, and this is my decision.” Blade pops the last of his muffin into his mouth. “I’ve got one last job for you guys.”

“One last job, huh?” Mrs Armstrong says, sighing. “From what I’ve heard from Nick, that other world is extremely dangerous.”

“We can take care of ourselves,” Clay says resolutely. He doesn’t want to leave this all behind. “We’ve done it...six times now? We can do it again.” And again, and again.

“As long as you kids can handle it,” Mr Armstrong says, “I don’t think I have a problem with it.”

“Now that I think about it, you were supposed to steal my Treasure, weren’t you?” Mrs Armstrong asks, confusion in her voice. “Whatever happened to that?”

“We were, but we didn’t,” Clay says. “We needed your Palace for the plan, so we couldn’t risk stealing your Treasure. The ‘Treasure’ we stole was a fake. Zak made a pretty convincing replica.”

“I spent the whole night making it, okay.”

“The Palace should have disappeared all on its own, now that your warped desires are gone,” Clay says, pulling out his phone and accessing the Meta-Nav. When entering Mrs Armstrong’s name, the location and the distortion, no results are found.

“Wait, I just realized that Clay can’t go to school,” Darryl says. “He’s supposed to be dead and everything and *George sits right behind him*.”

“He’ll just have to miss school,” Mrs Armstrong says, sitting up straight. “I’m sure Nick will be able to help him catch up on schoolwork.”

“What?” Nick’s eyes widen.

Clay sighs. He had been so happy for a second before she dropped the bomb on him. Well, it’s better than having to answer questions he doesn’t know the answer to in front of the whole class.

The rest of the table laughs. Their meal is concluded fairly quickly after, with loads of laughter and cheer. As the sun begins to set, the Thieves leave, promising to meet at Valentine Hills the next day to discuss their next step forward.

That night, after taking more paracetamol, Clay crashes into bed, that throbbing in his head returned. Floris is curled up next to his head. Clay is lulled to sleep by Floris’ soft breaths and the rhythmic clacking of Nick’s keyboard.

*

??/? - ??? - MIDNIGHT

“Welcome to my Velvet Room.” Igor greets his usual greeting as soon as Clay drags himself to the door of the jail cell.

“I see that you have overcome your hardship,” Igor says, fingers tapping against his table. “You have done very well, Trickster.”

“Have I?”

“Indeed.” Igor chuckles. “However, an even more powerful adversary lies before you. One that you must subdue to complete your rehabilitation.”

To complete his rehabilitation? Clay has stopped wondering for a while, but now that he's heard it again, he realizes that that word's meaning remains a mystery. Has his whole Phantom Thief journey been nothing but his "rehabilitation"? Or does it refer to something else?

"I wish you the best of luck, Trickster."

Clay returns to his bed and is soon in the clutches of sleep, the most restful sleep he's had in a long, long time.

Chapter End Notes

The Plan: Explained

- on 11/10, tuesday, the thieves entered the metaverse to scout out the police building. they realized their clothes didn't change as long as they do not approach the casino
- on 11/12, thursday, gina planted a tracking device on both dream and george's phones. she also tinkered with dream's phone by programming in messages that would appear on dream's phone once the two tracking devices are a fair distance from each other
- a few days prior, zak made a whole briefcase from scratch that shone and everything. it would be the fake treasure they would "steal".
- the day of the heist arrives, and dream allows himself to be caught. the real treasure was not stolen so mrs armstrong's palace didn't collapse.
- what he didn't plan for, however, was that the police would inject him with drugs, causing him to lose parts of his memory
- despite that, he remembers to ask mrs armstrong to show the phone to george who would arrive shortly
- mrs armstrong leaves the room and bumps into george. the two tracking devices are now near each other -> this means that mrs armstrong and george have now passed each other.
- gina activates the bookmarked location on the meta-nav: mrs armstrong's palace
- the two enter the metaverse. since george's clothes didn't change, he wasn't aware and continued on to the interrogation room borne of mrs armstrong's cognition
- mrs armstrong turns the corner to head to the elevator, now shielded from george's eyes. that's when the messages came in, causing her to stop to read the messages
- in the meantime, george kills a cognitive dream. this cognitive dream came into being since they're in a police station conjured by mrs armstrong's mind. she just interrogated him and so in her mind, clay is sitting in that very room
- george leaves the room after doing the deed and begins to walk back to the elevator
- when he passes by the spot where he entered the metaverse from, the meta-nav is activated again and he is brought back into the real world
- at the same time, mrs armstrong is still preoccupied with the messages. when she is told to return to the room to save dream, she heads back down the same hallway but in the metaverse. this is when she passes george a second time, but in different dimensions
- george turns the corner and mrs armstrong reaches the point where she entered the metaverse. gina once more activates the meta-nav, bring mrs armstrong out of the metaverse while george is already on the way back to the elevator to leave the building
- mrs armstrong got dream out of there, in one piece, but not in the best of health.

Fool arcana rank 7 -> 8 (Phantom Thieves)

Judgement arcana rank 5 -> 6 (igor)

An Old Enemy, A New Target

Chapter Summary

a new target

Chapter Notes

hello friends

the new arc starts this chap!

dream smp spoilers (tommy/tubbo arc):

omg dream just...just manipulating tommy like that holy shit THAT'S VERY SCARY

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

11/22 – SUNDAY – DAYTIME

“Are you feeling better now?” Floris asks.

“Definitely,” Clay says. He’s taken his paracetamol in the morning so his head doesn’t hurt as badly now. He’s traded his green hoodie for a grey one, head hidden under the hood. Green would stand out too much at this point, especially since he’s going somewhere as crowded as Valentine Hills on a Sunday.

“I think the rest of them are there already,” Nick says, pushing open the door to the diner.

Maybe Clay’s expectations were too high, because the only people there happen to be Eret and Harvey, chatting over coffee and tea with their books spread out on the table.

“We’re here for a Phantom Thief meeting and you guys are studying?” Floris turns his nose up at that.

“We have SATs next year,” Eret points out.

“February,” Harvey says.

“You ever thought about where you’re going yet?” Nick asks. “To college?”

“Pretty much,” Eret says, nodding. “Thinking of studying...International Relations.”

“Such a course exists?”

“Yeah. I saw it online.”

“Probably business or something,” Harvey says. “I gotta take care of the company.”

The rest of the Thieves begin to arrive. Darryl and Zak walk in together while Blade comes in just a bit later, briefcase in hand. The Thieves settle down around the table. Eret pulls out his laptop and logs onto Skype. Gina’s face appears on screen almost immediately after starting the call.

“Yo.” She does a slight wave, sipping on her bubble tea.

“Okay, so everyone’s here,” Clay says. “Let’s get this meeting started. Blade, what did you want to propose?”

“There’s this guy whose heart I wanna change,” Blade says. “And his name is Markus Singh.”

“Singh? Isn’t he that candidate?” Zak asks. “The guy running for president?”

“Yeah,” Nick says. “And he’s a bad guy.”

“That’s true enough,” Blade says. “He’s got eyes and ears everywhere. He controls most of the political world and is friends with all the rich people. He’s a tyrant.”

“How do you know that?” Floris asks.

Blade looks uncomfortable, as if considering his words. Finally, he speaks. “I’ve done a bit of research here and there. If you don’t believe me...” He reaches into his briefcase and retrieves a manila folder from within bound by string. He places it on the table.

“Proof.”

Clay nods. He trusts Blade on this and he believes that Blade has placed his trust in them as well, if he’s coming to them with merely a request instead of a deal. Eret thumbs through the pieces of paper, intrigue on his face. Harvey and Zak lean over to take a look as well.

“Markus Singh, huh?” Darryl stares down at the table. “Can we really take down someone like that?”

“We’ve come a long way,” Nick says. “First, we took down Krones who had, like, full control over the school.”

“Then Marion, who had control over the art world,” Zak says.

“Then a mob boss, and an international hacking organization, then the CEO of a conglomerate and now we’ve evaded death,” Gina says. “You seriously think we can’t deal with a president candidate?”

Darryl chuckles. “You’re right.”

“If we’re going to steal his Treasure, then we’re going to have to figure out the location and distortion as per usual,” Clay says. He activates the Meta-Nav and types in Markus Singh’s name into the box. The world pulses and Clay grins. They’ve got a hit.

“So, does anyone have any idea?”

The Thieves exchange glances. While they had a starting point for previous targets, there’s absolutely nothing they can go on from what little they really know about that man’s true nature.

“We know that he’s a congressman, right? Floris says. “Is there a spot in Fariold where he spent long periods of time at?”

“The Parliament Building, probably,” Eret says.

Clay inputs that into the second box and he gets a hit once again. They’re on a roll!

That sense of victory doesn’t last long. While they may have gotten the location right, the distortion is not as easy to figure out. What could Markus Singh see the Parliament Building as?

“If he likes to have control, then maybe...uh...a control room?” Nick asks.

No hit.

“Um...what about a school?” Harvey suggests.

“Where’d you even get ‘school’ from?” Eret flashes him an incredulous expression.

“Dunno. Maybe he’s the principal or something.”

Every suggestion after is even more outlandish than the one before it. Clay sighs, exhaling forcefully from his nostrils. They’ve spent about an hour trying everything under the sun and they’ve yet to come up with anything that activated the Meta-Nav.

“We’re getting nowhere,” Zak groans.

“I know,” Darryl grumbles.

“Let’s head on over to the Parliament Building,” Clay says. “Maybe we can get our noggins working if we’re near the place.”

“And we’ll know immediately if we’re in the Palace,” Eret says.

"Oh, by the way," Gina says, "before you guys leave."

"What is it?" Clay asks.

"You know, I found out something. About the whole Medjed thing," Gina says. "I know it's a long time ago, but back then, I realized what I found so weird."

"Spit it out already," Nick says.

"The code was...really sloppily written," Gina says, straw around her lips. "They created a fake Medjed website and posted that whole announcement about challenging us. But that code, honestly, was kinda shit. Nothing that real Medjed members would have written."

"Wait, so the people who targeted us weren't the real Medjed?" Zak asks, confused.

"Yeah," Gina says. "And I was doing a little digging in other sites. As it turns out, another website has been tampered with the same programmer."

"Another website?" Darryl frowns.

"Yeah," Gina says. "Take a guess."

"The..." Eret trails off, rubbing at his chin.

"The Phan-Site," Gina says. "The Phan-Site was tampered with. More specifically, the polls. No matter what anyone else voted, Andre Lee was destined to be chosen as a target."

"We were right in the sense that this was a setup..." Harvey mumbles. "We were played."

"I don't I'll let you guys know if I find anything else out," Gina says. "You're heading over to the Parliament Building, right? Well, good luck." She exits the call and Eret shuts his laptop down.

The Thieves pack up and exit the diner, heading straight for the train station.

*

["I give up."](#)

Clay leans against the wall, hands tucked into his pockets. How long have they been standing out here in the freezing cold?

"Same." Floris sighs. "We're never going to get anywhere if we just input random guesses."

"Let's ask the people who work around here," Eret suggests. "Chances are, they'll know something."

The venture proves fruitless as well. Each person they approach either delivers a droning monologue about Singh's greatness or duck their heads and hurries along, determined to ignore them.

"Dammit," Nick mutters, punching the wall. "We're getting nowhere fast."

"Dude, you researched him," Zak says, turning to face Blade. "Don't you have anything?"

"Absolutely not. Most of what I've retrieved are records. Nothing that can point us in the right direction."

"I was thinking," Darryl says, glancing over to Clay. "It's almost the election, isn't it?"

"Yeah?"

"Wouldn't he be going around doing rallies or something?"

"Then we can listen to one of his rallies. We'll be hearing the man's words himself." Floris nods approvingly. "Great idea!"

"He's got a rally scheduled at Valentine's tomorrow. We should go after school to watch," Harvey says.

"Right then." Clay turns to face his Thieves. "Tomorrow, we'll gather at the Valentine's station. We'll listen to his rally and see what we can deduce from what he says."

"It's all scripted, though," Eret points out. "We might not be able to find anything useful from it."

"Better than nothing," Nick says.

"In the meantime, we can continue to think about what the distortion can be," Floris says, and eyes Zak. "I don't even know how you came up with 'diamond mine'."

Zak puffs his cheeks out.

Clay glances over at several guards patrolling the area, serious expressions on their faces.

“Let’s get outta here. I really don’t wanna be around police right now.”

[They](#) head back home with Clay’s hood pulled over his head all the while. He stares at his phone as he leans against the wall, at George’s icon taunting him from his list of chats. The last message, sent by George, torments him, pulls at his heartstrings. Makes him question all that he’s known. He clutches the phone to his chest, willing his tears not to fall.

George: I love you

*

[11/22 – SUNDAY – EVENING](#)

Ruby: hey are you okay??

Ruby: what the news is saying isn’t true, right?

Me: no I’m fine

Me: sorry for worrying

*

Tommy: OI

Tommy: BIG D

Tommy: you aren’t dead are you

Me: wtf don’t call me big d

Me: im not dead im ok

*

Joel: I heard you died

Joel: if you’re still alive, please reply asap

Me: I’m fine

Me: Don’t worry. I won’t die so easily

*

[11/23 – MONDAY – AFTER SCHOOL](#)

There is quite the crowd gathered here. Clay weaves through the throngs of people who seem eager to meet Markus Singh. They find a good vantage point after squeezing past a group of squealing teenagers, waiting for Singh to step on the makeshift podium.

Clay glances around. That man’s face is plastered everywhere, accompanied by slogans that Clay remembers getting thrown around a lot recently. On the news, on social media, everywhere. To be honest, he’d expected just a little more coverage on the Phantom Thieves, perhaps, since he’s finally supposed to be “dead” after all.

His attention snaps back to the podium when a man walks up to it, microphone in hand, introducing the presidential candidate Markus Singh. He's not bad-looking, Clay has to admit, all decked out in that suit of his, with his signature sunglasses perched atop his nose.

As soon as he raises his hand to demand silence, the crowd quietens. That's when Clay knows he's the real deal.

"Citizens of Fariold. Today, I stand before you to speak about..."

Every single word is precious. Anything he says could be used as a clue. Just anything that could give them insight into his psyche.

"Affordable healthcare will be available to all. To be in good health is a human right, and income level should not be a barrier!"

Clay frowns. Nothing like that sounded like a keyword.

"Schooling will be free, because why should anyone pay for knowledge? From preschool to college, no one shall have to take a loan ever again!"

They've tried school...so it can't be that...

"I will ensure the economy is booming once again, to elevate our country to the next level! We will be globally competent. No longer will we be looked down upon by anyone else!"

Economy? Perhaps a bank?

"I will steer this country in the direction of glory!"

Something nags at Clay about that last sentence.

I will steer this country in the direction of glory!

Steer...this country...

"What's wrong?" Floris asks. Singh is already ending off the rally with a final wave to his adoring audience. Clay bites back his disgust. He has put up a charismatic front, commanding respect from whomever he meets, yet beneath that exterior lies a man driven by...by greed, probably. The greed for power.

The crowd begins to disperse as Singh is escorted back into his limousine, a man in black shutting the door behind him.

Clay's head begins to ache. Memories flood back. Memories of a wintry night...

A woman's scream, a man with his fists raised...that man's voice...

Clay remembers him now. It's all coming back to him, as clear as crystal. Singh and that man whose lawsuit put him on probation...they share the same voice. It must be...

"Hey, you're spacing out. Your fever coming back up?" Nick asks, a hand on Clay's shoulder.

[That](#) man...I know that guy."

Blade shoves his hands into his pockets. "Who? Singh? Yeah, well, everyone knows him--"

“No, not that,” Clay says, shaking his head. He turns to Nick. “You know how there’s this guy harassing this woman and I tried to save her? That’s why I’m on probation.”

Harvey looks confused. “Wait, what?”

“You’re joking,” Floris cries.

“That man put me on probation,” Clay says. “That man...he was the one I was saving that woman from.”

“Wait, are you serious?” Darryl asks, eyes wide.

“Yeah,” Clay says.

“Honestly, I can see him doing that,” Blade says with undisguised distaste.

“Then all the more we should steal his heart. He’s abusing his power for his own gain,” Zak says. “And we can pay him back for what he did to Clay.”

“Speaking of paying him back, we don’t even know his distortion yet,” Darryl says, sighing.

“Actually...” Clay trails off. “I’ve got a good idea, but let’s head on over to the Parliament Building first. If it’s what I think it is...”

“Alright then,” Nick says, shepherding the Thieves towards the station. “Let’s go.”

*

[“Here](#) we are.”

Clay glances around. There aren’t that many people here at this time of day. He pulls his phone from his pocket and activates the Meta-Nav.

“So, what do you think it is?” Nick asks, slinging an arm around Clay’s shoulder. “Come on, spit it out.”

“He said he wanted to steer this country in the direction of glory,” Clay says. He holds up his phone, showing it to the Thieves.

“A ship?” Darryl reads.

As soon as those words are out of his mouth, the world begins to pulse around them. The scenery begins to change, buildings swirling and morphing, infecting Clay with an uncomfortable light-headedness.

“Beginning navigation.”

Dream turns back to the Parliament building, the skyscraper that was once towering over them has transformed into an entranceway into a massive cruise ship, the concrete floor beneath them now a gleaming, wooden deck.

[“So](#) this is Singh’s Palace...” Fundy narrows his eyes at the enormity of the cruise ship. “This is sickening.”

“Guys, look around us.”

Dream turns to find Skeppy and Eret standing at the edge of the deck, by the railing, staring out into what must be an expansive ocean littered with ruins. The ship sails past the ruins, brick structures jutting out of the water. Not just buildings. Billboards, vehicles...Clay even saw a playground just rocking with the waves.

"This is horrible," TapL mumbles.

"This is what my fa-I mean, Singh sees the country," Techno says. He steps past them, staring at the cloudy sky, rays of sunlight peeking past them.

"As long as he, and the people he deems worthy, survives, he doesn't care whether the rest of the country sinks."

Chapter End Notes

well well well we're finally moving into the next arc! the 7th palace!

Ark of Pride: Infiltration Begin

Chapter Summary

infiltration begin for singh's cruise ship

Chapter Notes

yo i've just started playing p5r again but this time on merciless and decided to skip all the cutscenes etc lmao my 7th time watching them...and like the 11th time for that casino escape scene haha. cleared kamoshida's castle/1st palace in 4hrs lol

also

"he's in your bed but im in your twitch chat.
i've got the key and he's just a doormat."

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

11/23 – MONDAY – EVENING

They didn't get a good look around the ship that day, because Clay had been assaulted with a severe dizziness. The effects of the medicine had worn off and Clay was not in any position to do any Palace exploring that day.

Clay is propped up on his elbows, a book in hand. It's about Pope Joan, the first and only female pope in the history of the Catholic church, and how she had remained disguised for such a long time as a man.

"Must feel good, not having to go to school," Nick mutters.

"I'm technically dead," Clay says. He reads the last page of this enthralling tome and closes the book, placing it back on the shelf. He's got to hand it to Nick to return to the library tomorrow.

"In the eyes of the public."

Clay's head hits the pillow. If they're going to start infiltration soon, then he's got to get as much rest as he possibly can.

Before that, though, he fires a message to Darryl with an inquiry.

*

Tubbo: hello big man

Tubbo: you are not dead, are yo

Tubbo: I saw your frens in school

Tubbo: and they seemed really sad

Me: I'm fine

Me: thanks for worrying! They're just really good actors

*

Wilbur: Are you alive?

Wilbur: I'm sure you are

Wilbur: I don't think the leader of the Phantom Thieves would die so easily

Wilbur: also, I have another book recommendation for you

Wilbur: it's called Tidying the Heart

Me: thanks

Me: also, I'll get to reading the book when I can

Me: it's a little inconvenient to go out now.

*

Yao Yi: YOU'RE NOT DEAD ARE YOU

Yao Yi: PLEASE ANSWER ME ASAP

Me: I'm fine! Thanks for worrying!

Me: also I'm up to do more mementos missions if you have them

*

Darryl: I haven't been seeing much of George lately

Darryl: he's been calling in sick pretty often

Darryl: I'm sure he's fine, though.

Me: thanks for checking

Me: I'm just worried

Darryl: I'll let you know when he comes back to school

Darryl: until then, stay safe!

*

11/24 – TUESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“Okay, so let's mark the date of the election as the deadline,” Clay says. The Thieves are gathered in the Armstrongs' house. Both of Nick's parents are at work, so they have the whole house to themselves.

“The election is happening on December eighteenth, so we’re gonna have to prepare the calling card by the sixteenth,” Darryl says.

“Then that doesn’t give us a lot of time,” Floris says.

“We should go in and have a look-see,” Eret says, then glances over at Clay. “If you’re feeling up to it, of course.”

“I’m fine,” Clay says, nodding. He rises from his seat, throwing his bag over his shoulder which Floris hops into. “Alright then, let’s go.”

*

[Dream](#) brushes past several cognitive beings chatting in the entrance hall, flamboyant dresses and showy suits hanging off their shoulders, cocktails in hand. No one seems to give a damn about their presence here, not even as they rush past the main hall, headed for the grand staircase that takes them further into the ship.

“What are you doing here?”

Dream stomps against the carpet, halting abruptly as he comes face to face with a Shadow guard, holding a baton in hand. Well then, guess they’ll just have to do what they always do.

The Shadow, without even waiting for an explanation, bursts into black sludge which morphs into its demonic form: a lion with a pristine white mane and coat, fire blazing by its feet, a long scaly tail whipping behind it.

[“Navi-!”](#) Dream starts, only to catch himself on the second syllable.

A stream of fire bursts from its mouth, searing the floor where they stand. Dream darts out of the way, summoning White Rider. The flames can no longer touch him, merely ticklish as they lick at his ankles.

“It’s weak to Bufu!” Eret calls.

“Skeppy, swap with Fundy!” Dream shouts.

Skeppy jumps in, swinging his katana wildly, leaving a trail of ice in the air with every arc he draws. The Shadow growls, releasing another wall of flames that Dream and Bad shrug off. Eret pierces the flames with an arrow of light, the fires dissipating into cinders.

The Shadow ducks to avoid a fizzling white sphere soaring through the air courtesy of Dream’s Horus and leers, opening its mouth to release another blast of fire when an icicle spears through its body from below. The Shadow’s agonized cry pierces Dream’s ears as it bursts into ash, scattering about the carpet.

[Dream’s](#) chest heaves. He tosses a few glances around, immediately conscious of the eyes on him. The cognitive beings are staring at them, whispering amongst each other. Shit. Will Shadow Singh know about this?

“That was the most entertaining battle.”

“I wish they’d do more shows like these.”

One by one, the cognitive beings return to their earlier conversations as if nothing happened. Is no

one going to inform security?

“They treated us like some form of entertainment...” Fundy mutters.

“That must be because they think that as long as they are on this ship, they won’t come to any danger; they’d be under Singh’s protection,” Eret says.

“That’s good for us, then,” Clay says, tugging on the hem of his gloves. “Come on, let’s go. I think the Treasure’s further in.”

The Thieves dash up the staircase to the second floor which opens up into a large chamber, where more cognitive beings are gathered. Elevator music plays overhead, a calming tune despite their circumstances. Velvet curtains embroidered with gold and tapestries portraying Singh’s face line the walls. Chandeliers hang from the ceiling, statues of Singh carved from diamonds glimmering so brightly under the light.

How self-centred can this guy get?

“The Treasure’s right behind that door,” Fundy says, nose angled high.

“What? So soon?” Bad sounds unconvinced.

The Thieves walk up to the grand doors at the far end of the chamber, a ginormous padlock slapped onto them. Even the padlock is made of pure gold, judging from its weight and its lustre.

“You gotta be joking,” Sappan snarls. “We gotta find a fucking key?”

“Language!” Bad scolds. “And I don’t think it’s a key we’re looking for. Look, there isn’t even a keyhole!”

“What are these?” TapL asks. He traces his finger along a slit beside the door, a slit almost as thin as paper. Could this be a keyhole of sorts? There are two on TapL’s side of the door, and there are three on the other.

“We probably need recommendation letters or something,” Techno says, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. “That hall’s probably reserved for people he trusts. People who’ve gotten, uh, all five letters of recommendation.”

“That makes sense considering the Treasure is right behind this door,” Fundy agrees.

“I’m so confused.” Skeppy sighs.

“Basically, we just need to find five letters of recommendation,” Dream says, pacing across the hall. “And if they’re letters of recommendation, then they must come from people that Singh trusts-“

“That man wouldn’t trust anyone,” Techno interrupts. “It’s probably the five people he finds most useful.”

“But how would we know who they are?” Skeppy asks.

“Maybe we should listen to what these people have to say,” Eret says, turning back, eyes sweeping across the chamber of cognitive beings minding their own business.

“I doubt they’d talk to us,” Techno mumbles, arms folded.

“It’s worth a shot,” Dream says.

“There’s a safe room nearby,” Fundy says, sniffing the air. “Let’s split up. We can meet up there once we’ve gathered some info.”

The Thieves set off, spreading out around the chamber. Dream mingles with the cognitive guests, keeping his ears peeled. He asks a few people, only to be shut down quickly. These people sure are cold.

When Dream returns to the safe room, with zero information in hand, most of the other Thieves are already there, poring over a map spread out over the table in the middle.

If Dream thought that previous safe rooms were comfy and luxurious, this one takes the cake. There’s even a queen-size bed in the corner. The only one not here is TapL. Dream wanders over to where Fundy is seated, dropping into the empty spot next to him.

“Okay, so we’re here,” Fundy says, pointing to a rectangle on the map. There are several corridors branching out to other cabins and facilities, including a restaurant right above them, a pool and a casino. “There’s only one way up and that’s through this hallway.”

Dream watches as he traces their next steps with a paw, jaw dropping at the sheer number of cabins. Are they going to have to knock on every single door and ask whether they’d give them a letter of recommendation?

Before he can ask, TapL opens the door and enters, settling down in the only other empty seat around the table.

[“Now](#) that everyone’s here, let’s go over what we’ve learned,” Eret says. “I’ll start first, then we’ll go clockwise.” He clears his throat. “So I had managed to dig out some info about a politician that Singh seems very close to. His name is Said.”

“His name is what?” Sapnap cuts in.

“His name is actually Said,” Eret says. “I think I saw a similar name in those papers of yours, Techno.”

“Harris Said,” Techno confirms. “He’s Singh’s running mate in this upcoming election. The one who would be VP if Singh wins. He’s usually hanging out in the restaurant, or so I hear.”

“It would make sense that Singh would be close to him. And a restaurant. That gives us a starting point,” Dream says. “Alright, so Bad, what do you have for us?”

“I heard someone mentioning a TV station president,” Bad says. “I hear he likes to gamble.”

Gambling...Dream doesn’t want to hear that word ever again...

“Probably to broadcast content favourable for Singh,” Fundy says. “Did you catch his name?”

“Yeah. I think it’s something along the lines of...Ivan Terrace.”

“Ivan Terrace. Got it.” Dream throws up both his hands. “Okay, I’m next and I’ve got nothing.”

“What do you mean you’ve got nothing,” Techno deadpans.

“No one wanted to talk to me.”

Dream hates the silence that follows.

“Well, that’s sad,” Fundy says quickly. “Let’s move on. Skeppy, what did you fin-“

“What about *you*?” Skeppy asks pointedly.

Fundy takes a deep breath. “Well, I’m a fox. Do you think people wanna talk to me? Basically I found nothing to do now leave me alone.”

Dream blinks. What did he just say? Fundy was speaking a little too fast for him to catch, but from the pitiable looks on the other Thieves’ faces, he can guess.

Skeppy shares next. “So, I heard that there’s this woman called Yukimura. Some Japanese ambassador or something.”

“Makes sense that he’d want to secure international relations,” Eret says.

“And she’s a maneater, apparently.”

“Oh.”

Bad couldn’t find anything out either, so TapL goes next.

“There’s this woman called Grace Shore,” TapL says. “She’s the president of an IT company. My father wanted to merge with her company in her past, so I can recognize her if we need to.”

Dream nods. He turns to Blade hopefully. They’re still missing one piece of the puzzle and he’s hoping Blade’s got the information they need.

“I’m not sure whether he’s one of the five we need to get letters of recommendation from, but there’s this guy called the Cleaner.”

“The Cleaner?”

“This name popped up when I was researching Singh too,” Blade says, “but the Cleaner is secretive. I can’t find anything on him other than the fact that he’s a dangerous man.”

“A dangerous man...” If he’s dangerous in the real world, imagine what kind of powers he may wield in this cognitive realm.

“Then we’d probably want to target him last,” Dream says. “We’ll get the letters from the other four first.”

“Who was the first guy again? I forgot,” Zak asks.

“I think it was...Ivan Terrace?”

“No, that was the second guy.”

“It’s Harris Said, Ivan Terrace, Yukimura, Grace Shore and the Cleaner,” Dream says. He rises, headed for the exit. “Alright, let’s go and find them.”

[The](#) Thieves follow him out of the safe room, rolled-up map stuffed in Dream’s coat. There is only one way forward – the hallway that Fundy had pointed out earlier on the map, passing by many gold-plated doors and fancy trolleys and cleaning carts.

The Thieves pile into the elevator at the end of it. From what Dream can see on the number pad, the only way to go is up. Dream presses the button and the elevator doors clank shut. The car begins to rise.

It's spacey, Dream realizes, totally different from the other elevator's they've taken. At least they're not all squashed together like sardines in a can.

The elevator doors open after what seems like an eternity and the Thieves step out into a grand hall filled with buffet tables and cognitive beings eating from said buffet tables. This must be the restaurant.

And that means that Harris Said would probably be here.

There are Shadows roaming around too, patrolling the premises, making no effort to hide their presences. Gathering information would be a lot more difficult in this situation, but it's nothing that they can't handle.

It's time to get to work.

*

"No wonder we couldn't find him," Dream mutters.

The Thieves are staring down a doorway decorated with balloons and streamers glittering with golden sparkles. It seems that an even more sophisticated restaurant lies past this path, though a Shadow receptionist stands behind a counter by the entrance.

"This guy's his running mate. Makes sense that he wouldn't be eating with plebs like us," TapL says.

"I'm a little worried about that guy over there," Bad says.

"Who? The Shadow?" Dream looks back at the Shadow attending to a group of guests.

"Yeah, he seems to be checking something..." Bad tilts his head. "Do we need some kind of document to get past?"

"Maybe we need a member's card or something, just like the casino," Skeppy says, hands behind his head.

Techno is already walking up to the Shadow with confident strides. The group of guests from earlier head into the restaurant, leaving the Shadow free to speak with them.

"May I see your member's card, please?" the Shadow asks.

Well, turns out Skeppy is right on the money; they'd probably need to pilfer a member's card off one of the guests here. Still, that's not an easy task. Cognitive beings who eat out here in the plebians' restaurant are unlikely to have a member's card. Perhaps they could try one of the guests at the entrance hall...but they'll risk bumping into Shadows...

"I heard Greenwood lost his member's card..."

"Really? That's so absentminded of him."

"Yeah, he's so undeserving of that membership."

“Maybe one of the bartenders picked it up somewhere? It’s not like they have identification info on those cards...do you think they’ll give it to me if I asked?”

“Did you hear that?” Sapnap whispers.

Dream definitely has. Cognitive beings are very useful when it comes to leaking information, he finds. Now they’ve just got to nab that card from one of the bartenders in this area...

Surveying the area with a mere glance, Dream realizes that the task is not going to be as easy as he thinks it will be. There are quite a few bars spread out across this restaurant. Not to mention that the restaurant has two floors, a central staircase taking them to the lower one.

Perhaps it’s time to split up again. Fundy and Eret can’t be in the same team, that’s for sure. Dream, Eret, Sapnap and TapL would be together, while Fundy, Bad, Skeppy and Techno would form the other team.

“We have no means of communication among us,” Dream says. “We will search for thirty minutes and no matter whether we’re done searching the floor or not, we’ll return to this hallway, okay? Alright, move out!”

Dream leads his team down the staircase, their footsteps swallowed by the plush carpet.

Thus, their search for the member’s card begins.

*

[“Run!”](#) Holy crap! Run!” Sapnap shrieks.

Dream digs his heels into the ground as a fireball sears the carpet where his feet will have been had he carried on. He turns around, emptying the last of his barrel into the pursuing Shadow, the same type that they fought in the entrance hall. The Shadow whimpers, bursting into dust as the bullets puncture its flesh.

“Oh my God!” Eret yells as a bolt of electricity whizzes by him. This Shadow sports a hairy, white body, an ornate silver crown on its head, wide green eyes trained on their retreating backs.

“Shit! Shit! Shit! TapL! Catch!”

With a flick of his wrist, Dream sends the card spinning through the air in TapL’s general direction before he’s shocked by what must be a million volts of electricity. His body seizes up and convulses, the pain so intense that he can hardly scream, eyes bulging, threatening to pop out from their sockets.

Almost instantly, the electricity disappears, crackling ever so loudly as Dream drops to the ground, the stench of charred flesh assaulting his nostrils. He can hardly move his limbs, grimacing as he waves a blackened arm, summoning Norn and wrapping himself in tendrils of green. His skin returns to its usual colour, bringing with it a sense of touch again.

“No!”

Dream hardly has time to rest when he notices that the Shadow has rammed into TapL from behind, causing him to stumble and fall, the member’s card thrust forward. In front, Sapnap picks his charged cudgel up from the carpet and hurtles himself forward, making a grab for the card.

The Shadow snatches it up between its jaws, growling as it turns to face them. Well, crap.

An arrow of light sails through the air, striking Barong's coat, only to fizzle into nothingness. Eret grits his teeth, dismissing Robin Hood.

"It nulls Kou skills, Dream!"

The Shadow's tail begins to wag, shaking its shaggy fur and electricity once more crackles in the air. Damn it! Without knowing its weakness, it is much harder to strike Shadows down. Hell, Dream doesn't even know its *name*! Clearly, Zio skills won't work, and as Eret just found out, neither will Kou skills. What other elements can they try?

TapL readies Milady's guns, the firearms emerging from her dress, punching holes in Barong's body. Barong yelps and releases another wave of electricity. Dream grins as Sapnap yells, smashing his cudgel into its flank and sending it crashing into several tables, much to the shock and fear of the cognitive guests.

The member's card is torn from its mouth, landing on the ground with hardly a sound. Sapnap dashes forth and scoops it up, stuffing it protectively in his pocket.

"I've got it!" Sapnap shouts. "Run!"

"TapL!" Dream readies his gun, and TapL follows his lead, grabbing his grenade launcher while Sapnap and Eret make their escape.

As the Barong hops to its feet, Dream puts holes in its limbs and TapL sends an explosive shell at it. The Barong barely has time to scream as the grenade detonates, spraying dust everywhere and killing several other cognitive guests as well.

Well then.

It's best that they leave, before other Shadow guards show up, which Dream is certain they will soon. He and TapL follow Sapnap and Eret's lead, racing up the staircase, only to run right into Skeppy.

"Whoa!" Eret nearly falls over, grabbing onto the railing to steady himself.

"We were going to look for you guys," Skeppy says. Bad is right behind him, with Fundy on his shoulder. Techno stands by the hallway, leaning against the wall and watching the guests.

"We got..." Dream huffs, struggling to catch his breath. "We got the card."

The chattering of Shadows is getting louder and louder. There's no time to talk. Retrieving the card from Sapnap, Dream makes for the hallway where Techno is. Techno raises his head at their arrival, stepping aside and letting them through. Dream dares not look back, but he can hear the pounding of footsteps even on the near-soundless carpet.

[As soon](#) as all the Thieves are through, Techno slams the doors shut, stomping on the gooey body of a Shadow attempting to squeeze through the slit between the door and the floor.

The Thieves lean against the wall, Dream's fingers tight around the card. They've managed to find it after much searching, only to have been discovered by a patrolling guard. Needless to say, the battle was cripplingly difficult without knowing the weaknesses nor strengths of their enemies.

Or maybe they've just gotten too used to Navi's presence...

Dream shakes his head. He can deal with that later. For now, he has to concentrate on getting the

letters of recommendation. He composes himself as fast as he can, adjusting his coat, ignoring the way it sticks to his sweaty body. He walks boldly up to the Shadow by the reception counter, handing it the member's card.

"Please, sit wherever you like," the Shadow says. "Except for the table with the blue flowers. That is where our distinguished guest, Mr Said, sits."

Mr Said. There's that name. "Is his full name Harris Said?"

The Shadow fixes Dream with a distasteful expression. "I'm afraid I cannot disclose the private information of guests."

Well, so much for that. They've just got to believe that this Mr Said is the one they're looking for.

"Wait," Techno says. "I think we should send two people in."

"Two people?" TapL asks.

"Fewer people the better because we don't want to scare that man away. Two people because it would be just awkward dining alone." Techno glances around at the extravagant decorations. "Especially in a place like this."

"He's right, he's right," Fundy says, nodding. "But who do we want to send in?"

"TapL should be one of them," Dream says, "because he'd probably know more than us about fine dining."

"Actually-" TapL starts, only to get cut off.

"Ooh, can I go?" Skeppy looks the most excited, raising his hand and jumping about like an eager child. "This has got to be the most expensive place I've ever eaten at in my life."

"I'm okay with that," Fundy says. "He'll probably never have another chance in his life..."

"What does *that* mean?" Skeppy whines.

In the end, the team watches from afar, by the entrance to the restaurant while Skeppy and TapL head over to one of the tables nearer that of Said's, settling down and perusing the menu.

No sign of Said. Dream scans the other guests, eyes darting to the other parts of the restaurant. At the far end of the room, there is another corridor that presumably takes them to other parts of the ship. Other cabins, maybe?

"He's here," Sapnap whispers, tapping Dream's shoulder.

Sure enough, a man walks in from the other hallway, flanked by two bodyguards in suits marching with utmost rigidity. He makes a beeline for the table with the bluebells, sitting himself down while waiters and waitresses flock to tend to him.

Neither TapL nor Skeppy make a move. The timing is not right. Not yet. They wait till the waiters and waitresses have rushed off to prepare their orders.

That's when Skeppy makes his move. He stands and ambles over to the man, only to be stopped by the burly bodyguard giving him a good shove.

"State your business with Vice President Said."

“Huh? Oh, I just want a letter of recommendation.” Skeppy blinks innocently. TapL moves over to back him up.

Cognitive Said looks up at Skeppy and TapL, giving them a good once-over before cackling. “A letter of recommendation? For you?” He waves dismissively. “You’re just children. This place is for grown-ups. Go home.”

“Yo, we’re not leaving till we get it-“ Skeppy is interrupted by the second bodyguard, holding up the tip of a knife to his neck. His eyes go wide, holding up both hands in surrender. “Okay, okay, maybe not.”

“I’m glad you understand,” Cognitive Said says. The knife is removed from Skeppy’s neck where a dot of red is visible. “Now, please leave before I lose my appetite from speaking to a hooligan.”

“Before you what?” Skeppy cries, fingers curling around his katana’s grip. “Okay, that’s it! That’s it, buddy! I’m gonna fuck you up-”

The bodyguard comes at him again with that knife of hers, only for the blade to meet a white shield, knocking it out of her hand. Dream runs up to them with the rest of the team. Eret dismisses Robin Hood.

“What? Aren’t you-“ Cognitive Said starts, leaping to his feet.

“Hand over that recommendation letter, you asshole!”

“Language,” Bad mutters, “but he’s right! Hand it over!”

“You brats!” Said hisses. Dream can sense immense power behind that furious snarl. He steels himself, ready to draw his weapon if necessary. Cognitive Said’s limbs begin to jerk robotically, black flames swirling around his feet and consuming his body whole.

[Cognitive](#) guests begin to scream, running from the venue. Shadows that have been standing guard around the restaurant rush up to them, already bursting into their monstrous forms midway through. The gears turn quickly in Dream’s mind as he organizes his team.

“Fundy, Bad and Skeppy, with me! Everyone else deal with the other Shadows!” Dream shouts.

Shadow Said has emerged from the pillar of flames, rising to his full, intimidating height. A hydra towers over them, green scales glinting in the chandelier’s light. At least nine reptilian eyes peering down at them, forked tongues flicking in and out as they assess their strengths.

“You insolent brats need to be taught when to shut your mouths!” Shadow Said’s voice is distorted, but that’s to be expected when nine snake heads are yelling at the same time at varying pitches. Dream winces, wishing that he can jam his fingers into his ears.

Shadow Said lets loose a breath of ice that paralyses the ground with shimmering crystals. Dream leaps into the air, narrowly dodging that ice attack, swapping his Personas in mid-air. He summons Mishaguji, whipping out his pistol at the same time and aiming it at one of the heads.

The bullet smashes the snake’s head, bursting into ash as Dream lands on the icy ground. He nearly slips, the soles of his shoes too smooth to gain traction. With a crack, the ice shatters, shards of ice dissolving into water. Bad hurls a volley of fireballs at Shadow Said, crashing into Said’s body. Said is barely even fazed.

To Dream’s dismay, the head that he had blasted off regrows, its jaws snappier and fangs sharper.

Shadow Said cloaks itself in a pale light. The magic power it gathers is so intense that Dream can feel it from where he stands. A big one is coming, and he's not sure they can take it.

"Bad, swap with Techno!"

Bad and Techno obey, the two managing to switch up their formation right before Shadow Said unleashes his raging snowstorm. The temperature drops frighteningly fast. Dream shivers, wincing as hailstones batter him relentlessly, and summons Skadi. A white shield surrounds him, giving him a sort of relief from both the cold and the hailstones.

The snow obscures his vision, a shower of powder white making it almost impossible to see. Dream grits his teeth, ducking his head and staring at the ground. Stare at the snow for too long and one would go blind.

"Bad!"

"What?"

"Fire! Fire as fast as you can! Burn it all up!" Dream dismisses Skadi and summons Seth. He raises his head, squinting against the white, realizing with shocked horror that Shadow Said is once more charged up and preparing its snowstorm attack. Dream's fine since he has a Persona that can protect him from the chill, but as for the rest of his team...he's not sure how long they can hold out.

Fireballs fly randomly, crashing into walls, into piles of snow, melting the ice. Okay, so they've tried guns, they've tried fire...guess it's time to try other elements.

Techno summons Anat, a flare of cyan nuking three heads at once. Shadow Said roars, forced to cancel that attack, body still glowing with pale colours. If it gets even one more snowstorm in, they're doomed.

"He can't attack if he's missing a single head," Techno says with a hand on Dream's shoulder, drawing him aside.

"But the heads regenerate quickly." As if on cue, the three heads that Techno had decimated grow back, good as new.

"Then we've got to slice them all off at the same time."

Is that even possible? There are nine heads and only eight of them. Unless one person can slice two... An idea pops into his head.

"Fundy!" Dream yells.

Fundy summons Zorro, calling forth wind sickles that fly randomly, slicing each of the heads clean off while summoning a tornado that boosts Skeppy up, the latter swinging his katana and slits the throats of the heads that the sickles miss. Dream and Techno open fire, blasting away the few heads that remain.

Shadow Said's shriek is cut off as the final head falls from his neck, his body returning to its deep green colour before fading away into strips of ash. Only his cognitive self remains on his hands and knees, head lowered, the picture of defeat.

The other Shadows have been dealt with by the Thieves as well. However, they've made a huge mess of the scene, with snow gathered in mounds and frost plastered on the glass. More security

guards are going to arrive at any moment now. They have to leave, and fast.

“Letter of recommendation,” Skeppy says, grabbing Cognitive Said by the collar. “Now!”

Cognitive Said whimpers, retrieving a piece of paper shakily from his suit pocket. Skeppy snatches it from him and waves it in his face.

“Who’s the hooligan now, you assh-“

“Hallway! Everyone! Go, go, go!” Dream begins to sprint in the direction of the hallway, jumping over piles of snow, the soles of his feet sliding along the patches of ice frozen across the length of the room. The rest of Thieves are right behind him, performing the same sort of acrobatic stunts, hopping over tables, swerving to avoid the cognitive guests.

[There](#) is an elevator at the very end which the Thieves rush into. Dream hardly dares to glance around, hearing the growling and snapping of Shadows right on his heels. They burst into dust from one of TapL’s grenades, spraying up dust and ash, buying Dream enough time to get into the elevator right before the doors slam shut.

The elevator car begins to move, head even further upwards. Dream’s heart races, slamming against his ribcage, thunderous in the silence of the elevator. The other Thieves look exhausted as well, bodies slumped against the walls of the car, peeling themselves off when the elevator opens with a ding.

Dream shoots the Shadow that greets them through the forehead, the Shadow turning to dust. They’ve arrived in some kind of cabin area, multiple doors flanking them.

“There’s a safe room up ahead,” Fundy says. “Come on.”

*

[Have](#) you got the recommendation letter, Skeppy?” Eret asks.

Skeppy is half asleep on Bad’s shoulder, the piece of paper he nicked from Cognitive Said’s hands loosely grasped between his fingers. He tosses it onto the table. It’s torn, but it’s also sealed with Said’s wax seal.

“Alright,” Sapnap says with a yawn, pumping his fists into the air. “That’s one down.”

“Four more to go,” Dream says, sighing.

Everyone’s clearly tired. There’s no reason they should continue with the infiltration today. Perhaps another time. When Dream proposes that they return for the day, he isn’t met with any objections. Eret finds a window with an emergency ladder that drops them down to the deck of the ship, where they had entered the Metaverse from.

One by one, the Thieves descend the rope ladder, the ladder unsteady in the wind. Once the Thieves have made it safely down to the deck, Dream pulls out his phone and activates the Meta-Nav.

“Returning to the real world. Thank you for your hard work.”

*

[11/24 – TUESDAY – EVENING](#)

Niki: omgggg are you okay??

Niki: please text me back if you are alright!

Me: I'm okay! Thanks for worrying!

Me: I don't think I'll be back for a while, though

*

Phil: Hello clay

Phil: Will told me you're alive, so I have no need to worry

Phil: Still, how're you doing?

Phil: My shop's still open if you need to buy anything

Me: Thank you! I'm doing ok for a dead guy

Me: I'll be swinging by sometime later, I think. Some of our weapons are getting a little rusty.

*

Montgomery: Clay, the news has reported your death.

Montgomery: While I'd like to think that you are fine, I'd like a confirmation.

Montgomery: Please reply to this message as soon as you can.

Me: I'm fine, thanks!

Me: Still alive and kicking

*

PhoenixSC: Hey dream

PhoenixSC: you're not dead are you

Me: no I'm not

Me: thanks haha

Chapter End Notes

this chap took friggin foreverrrrrrr

if anyone's curious, the shadows faced are:

in the entrance hall: cerberus

the electric guy chasing them for the card: barong

shadow said: yamata-no-orochi

Thanksgiving

Chapter Summary

lol just a few s links

i have no idea how thanksgiving goes i just know it involves turkey

Chapter Notes

when i said the story is moving fast in chap 129 i mean it but lemme pls take a rest from all the intense chaps

im gonna be skipping a couple of in-fic days because i dont have that many non-automatic social links to max anymore

how'd u guys find the last mcc of this season? i would watch cyan candy canes but im waiting for the streams to end first so i can watch from the beginning

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

11/25 – WEDNESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

Clay wakes up to Ant tugging at his pant leg. What...? Where's he...? The doorbell's ringing. Incessantly, he might add. Clay tries to shake the grogginess away as he throws on a shirt and a pair of slacks, stumbling down the staircase towards the door.

When he opens the door, he finds a familiar boy standing outside with a giant bandage plastered on his forehead. He knows this boy. It's that boy he helped send to the hospital who was involved in that hit-and-run accident.

"I'd like to thank you," Timothy says, words rushed. "For...for calling the ambulance and, uh, helping me..."

"It's no problem," Clay says. Looks like he's fine now. Discharged and all that. His forehead would probably scar, though. "Honestly, the one you should be thanking is Ant."

"Ant? The Devil?"

"Well, *Ant* was the one who woke me up and got me to help you. If it didn't, then..." Clay trails off, not exactly wanting to finish that.

"Really?"

"Yeah. I was asleep and then Ant woke me up. When I followed it, it led me to you."

Timothy's cheeks flush as he tries to peer past Clay's shoulder.

[“Is...Is Ant here?”](#) Timothy asks, voice almost as soft as a whisper.

Clay glances down at his feet, where Ant is supposed to be...but isn't.

“Ant?” Clay calls. The cat, he realizes, is perched on the couch, large eyes staring at them. Timothy seems to notice it too, meeting its gaze.

“You wanna come in?”

Timothy accepts the invitation, entering the house and toeing off his shoes. Ant leaps off the couch as Timothy approaches, padding over to Clay. Clay scoops it up in his arms as he and Timothy sit.

“May I...pet it?” Timothy asks, fidgeting nervously. Clay glances down at Ant, who now looks more confused than afraid.

Ant is the one who moves forward once set down on the couch, tilting his head up experimentally towards Timothy's waiting hand. It starts off as a slow rub, Timothy's fingers scratching it behind its ears and Ant purrs into the touch. Eventually, Ant's curled up in Timothy's lap as he runs his fingers through its coat, meowing every so often.

It must be a new thing for Ant, to be petted by someone other than the Armstrongs, but he gets used to it quickly, meowing and pawing at Timothy's hand when he stops.

When Timothy leaves that day, promising to come back and visit Ant sometime, that Clay, for the first time, finds Ant staring longingly out the window at someone else. Someone who is learning to look past the rumours, past the suspicions, at its core.

Clay heads on over to the kitchen and prepares a bowl of kibble for him. Salmon-flavoured, just how he likes it. When he returns, Ant bounds towards him, tail swishing as it chows down on the food.

Clay smiles as he rubs Ant's head. It seems that things are looking up for Ant after far too long. Perhaps word can spread and it can finally receive the treatment it deserves.

*

[11/26 – THURSDAY – AFTER SCHOOL](#)

“Thanks for coming out here. I know it's a hassle since you're supposed to be dead.”

“It's fine.”

Clay sits in a dainty chair in a dainty café which offers moderately-priced coffee and pastries. It has a slightly different atmosphere from the kinds that Darryl brings him to. It feels more...refined, more like he, as a commoner, shouldn't belong there.

“It's alright,” Clay says, running his finger along the handle of the cup. Even the cup is made of porcelain, a pure snow white with tiny pink flowers on its bottom. Does Harvey come to such places often? He looks like he belongs here, what with those mannerisms and tone.

Naturally. He's come from a family who emphasizes on such practices, after all.

“What did you ask me out here for?”

“I was thinking of just trying coffee from this shop. I heard it's special,” Harvey says, gesturing to the cup sitting in front of Clay. It does have a unique smell. It's not off-putting, but the way

Harvey's staring at him is a little suspicious.

Well, it's not like Harvey's going to poison him or anything, right?

"Here goes nothing."

Clay downs the whole cup, leaving not even a single drop. It isn't as bitter as he'd expected it to be. In fact, it's pretty good. Yet one cup costs so much...

"How is it?" Harvey watches him expectantly.

"It's not bad. What coffee is this?"

Harvey takes a sip and places the cup back on the saucer with a soft clink. "It's Black Ivory Coffee, made from beans extracted from elephant poop."

Oh.

Well then.

"I've been trying to taste more exotic coffee recently," Harvey says. "I was thinking of starting my own chain of cafés."

"A chain?"

"Yeah," Harvey says. "It's to carry on my family's legacy."

"But your family's legacy is Lee Foods, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

Harvey doesn't seem to want to talk about it just yet, because he calls the waiter and orders another two cups of the coffee. Despite its origin, the coffee's taste calls his name, and Clay is unable to resist a second cup.

"How much does this cost?"

"I'm paying, so honestly, it doesn't matter."

"Are you serious?"

"Besides, I was the one who invited you out."

"And he's richer than you. Much richer." Floris says, popping his head out of Clay's bag.

"You didn't have to rub that in!" Clay whispers. Floris cackles.

Harvey pays for it in the end. He promises to invite Clay back out to try more coffee, perhaps, or other types of cuisine. They part ways at the station, and Clay makes his way home.

*

[11/26 – THURSDAY – EVENING](#)

"Happy Thanksgiving!"

Mr Armstrong heaves a giant plate of turkey into the dining room, accompanied by Nick who

brings out the other. Most of the Thieves have gathered at the table, setting the cutlery or just chatting. The mashed potatoes look scrumptious, covered in viscous gravy and even the vegetables seem juicy and delicious.

Once everyone's settled, they say a little prayer, a prayer of thanks, before digging in.

"Growing boys should eat more. There's plenty for everyone."

"Oh my God, thanks!"

"You kids should take a break from your Phantom Thief stuff once in a while."

"It's chow time!"

When enjoyed with everyone, Thanksgiving presents a sense of fun that is now synonymous with the Thieves. Nick, Darryl, Zak and Harvey end up sprawled over the couch, playing a game of Splatoon. Eret and Blade help with the cleanup.

Clay wanders outside, onto the porch, with a plate of pumpkin pie. The moon is already glowing, surrounded by a sea of stars. Floris leaps onto his lap as Clay settles down on a bamboo armchair.

The moon is beautiful in its gibbous phase. In just a few days, it would be full. Clouds fill the sky, almost invisible in the dark of the night. He can hear the crickets despite the onset of winter. A cold breeze whips at his face, rustling leaves. It might rain tonight.

He wonders how George is doing. Is he well? Is he living in guilt, perhaps? Or hollowness? Or even...Clay bites his lip, willing the thought to disappear, only to reinforce it. Or even...relief? Relief that Clay is dead?

Did Clay mean anything to him at all?

"What're you thinking?" Floris asks, taking a small bite of the pie.

Clay shakes his head, swallowing hard. "It's nothing."

Floris doesn't push it. Clay dips his head and cuts a bit of his pie, shoving it into his mouth.

Even if he and George are apart, they are still staring up at the same moon.

*

"Why didn't you invite the rest of the Thieves?" Gina asks, gaze cast down onto her candied yam. She nibbles at it. Must not have much of an appetite, George thinks.

She's been holed up in her room ever since the news announced Clay's death, emerging only for this Thanksgiving dinner. It's as if she's gone back to before they've met the Thieves. While Clay wasn't the closest to her – Zak and Eret beat him by just a bit – his death still took a toll on her.

"They're grieving," George says. "I think it's best to...to let them grieve for now."

Dinner has never been so quiet. Gina pokes at her food listlessly. George chews slowly, unsure of what to say. All that runs through his mind is an overwhelming sense of sorrow. And rage. Rage that his father forced him to make a choice, tearing him apart from the inside, almost like maggots ripping at his flesh.

It's unfair. This world is so unfair. Why did...

No.

He has a plan. A plan to take his father down once and for all. What he's done is for the good of the country, the good of the Thieves, and most importantly, for Gina's good. For all their sakes, sacrifices must be made. Even if that sacrifice is...

George glances out the window, noticing the moon. It's nearly full, casting its brilliant moonlight over the city. George turns back to his food and for just an instant, he can almost see *his* ghost sitting beside him. Not just him. The rest of the Phantom Thieves. All laughing and smiling and joking. Longing stabs him through the chest as he dips his head, refusing to give in to these delusions.

The happy times are over now.

*

Chapter End Notes

Devil arcana rank 8 -> 9 (AntF.)

Guts +5 (read book)

Strength arcana rank 2 -> 3 (TapL)

Charm +3 (drank that coffee yo)

Charm + 5 (read book)

Kindness +3 (did housework)

Ark of Pride: Infiltration Middle

Chapter Summary

2 letters of recommendations: get!

Chapter Notes

soz this came out later than expected it took SUPER long to write this...

i apologize in advance if the battle scenes aren't as well-written as would be expected...

next chap would be s links again! will continue tapl's + wrap up several others'

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

11/28 – SATURDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

The Palace doesn't seem to be as on guard as it had been when they were last here. That gives them a lot of freedom to be moving around now, at the very least. They have four more targets left: Yukimura, the ambassador, Ivan Terrace, the president of a TV station, Grace Shore, the president of an IT company and the Cleaner, shrouded in mystery.

There is no information on Yukimura other than the fact that she's a maneater – they may have to do some reconnaissance should it come down to that. Terrace gambles, so they're going to have to make their way to the casino. Harvey can recognize Shore, so they should have no problems with that. The Cleaner...that's someone they'll have to ask about along with Yukimura.

There is only one way forward, and they will have to navigate the maze of hallways, each one flanked with either cabin doors or displays of Singh's trophies. There are Shadows patrolling the hallways, but given the numerous twists and turns, Dream and the others are able to put bullet holes in their heads before they even notice their presences.

In the next room, a lounge, a towering statue of Singh stands in its middle, an ominous glowing pedestal beneath it.

"Wait!" Eret shouts suddenly, just as Dream takes his first step into the room.

Before Dream can answer, his voice is ripped from his throat. A flash of light blinds him. The world spins. When Dream regains his senses, he tries to call out to them – his friends – only to discover that all he can really do is squeak. Why's the world around him so...so big?

What the fuck.

Skeppy and TapL burst out into hysterical laughter. Bad beckons him over, a wide grin on his face. Even Techno's trying to hide a smile.

Dream whips his tail around, squeaking angrily as he scurries over to them, hating the way he now

has *paws* instead of hands and feet. Well, at least his mask is still on his face, albeit being a smaller version.

The moment he's out of the room, however, he transforms back into his human form. No longer quadrupedal, no longer in possession of tiny claws and a tail. Dream has never been so attached to his human limbs before.

"The exact same thing happened to Bad last time," Fundy says.

"I must say, you were rather cute as a mouse," Eret says.

"Oh shut it."

"Anyway, it seems that we're going to have to pass through this room to get to the pool." Eret gestures at the statue. "And what Robin Hood is telling me is that that statue is going to turn us into mice."

"So basically he sees other people as rats," TapL says with a frown.

"Is there a way to deactivate it?" Sapnap asks.

Eret shakes his head. "I have no idea."

"Well, no matter whether there's a way to deactivate it, we might wanna avoid battles as mice," Techno says. "Something tells me we're just going to die if we get caught."

"Then we'd just not get caught," Dream says.

"Alright then," Fundy says, rubbing his paws together. "Let's go!"

*

As it turns out, they only turn into mice in rooms with Singh's statue. It's a good thing in the sense that Shadows don't usually patrol the lounge as frequently as they would the corridors, giving them a lot of leeway to move about.

It seems, also, that they are able to wriggle into vents that would otherwise be too small for their human bodies with ease.

Their first problem arrives when they reach a large hall, a gigantic Singh statue standing in the middle of it. The pedestal glows bright, reflected off the shiny golden walls. The statue itself isn't the issue, nor the sheer size of the chamber.

"There are, like, three of them!" TapL hisses.

Dream bites his lip. Three Shadows making their rounds in broad daylight, black suits a stark contrast against the brightness of the walls. The rifles in their hands are, naturally, alarming.

"We're going to have to split up, then," Eret says. "Otherwise, there's a definite chance that we're going to get discovered."

"That makes sense," Dream says. Once again, the team splits up into two groups of four. Dream's group will scout out the room, look for any vents that they can pop in to proceed further into the ship. Meanwhile, the other group will stay behind and cover for the first group in case they get discovered.

With that said, the second group consists of people who specialize in long-ranged skills, including Eret, Bad, TapL and Skeppy. Dream takes a deep breath, meeting the eyes of the formidable Singh statue, and sets foot into the hall with Fundy, Sapnap and Techno, their bodies shrinking, limbs transforming into paws and tails sprouting from their backs.

Dream drops to the ground, hyper-aware of the footsteps of the three Shadows thumping against the floor. He runs along the wall, keeping close to the sparkling ornaments and elaborate tapestries. He perks his ears up, constantly listening out for the Shadows' tell-tale mumblings.

Dream stifles a squeak as someone pulls at his tail – it's Fundy, judging from the mask – and he spins around. Fundy squeaks, pointing to what appears to be a vent in the distance, partially hidden behind some decorative nasturtium bushes. No harm checking it out.

Dream darts beneath a sofa, where Sapnap, Techno and Fundy squirm in after him. Poking his snout out from underneath, Dream waits with bated breath as a Shadow shambles past, the glint of its rifle utterly threatening when they are unable to defend themselves. Dream has never felt so helpless in the Metaverse since...ever.

The Shadow walks by, none the wiser, walking off to patrol another part of the room. On Dream's cue, the group follows him, scampering past the giant statue, headed for the vent.

Thankfully, the vent is missing its grate, so Dream manages to squeeze himself through the tiny hole in the wall. The vent is choked with dust. And it's dark. Dream hates the dark.

[A deafening](#) scream splits Dream's eardrums and Dream seizes up. Wait a minute...that's no scream, more like a terrified or surprised squeak. He spins around, finding Sapnap and Fundy doing the same, hairs on their bodies risen with fear.

Techno is missing.

Shit.

“What the-? When did these rats get in here?”

Sapnap is the first to leap out of the vent at the Shadow, sinking his teeth into its arm. The Shadow screams, dropping Techno, black blood spurting from the wound. Techno falls to the ground, landing gracefully on his paws.

Unfortunately, the Shadow's shriek has drawn the attention of the other Shadows.

Where the fuck is their backup team?

Just as Dream thinks that, a fireball comes hurtling out of nowhere, smashing the Shadow in its face before it can even transform. The Shadow roars, bursting into ash.

Another one perishes at the blast of TapL's grenade.

[The](#) final Shadow morphs into a Garuda, wings spread and soaring high above their heads. Great. Just great. The natural predator of mice.

It neatly dodges a spear of ice arrowing up from the carpet, the icicle shattering as Garuda's talons open wide, making a grab for the mice. Fundy manages to jump out of the way as Garuda's talon slams into the opening of the vent, trapping Dream inside.

Dream's heart is pounding in his tiny mouse ribcage. His whiskers twitch as the Garuda slams its

talons once more into the vent's opening, its cawing instilling in Dream a most animalistic fear.

The Garuda leaves him alone once it realizes that it's not getting anywhere with Dream. Dream takes his chance and drops to the ground, joining Fundy under the nearby sofa.

An arrow of light pierces Garuda's wing, sending it crashing to the ground. It screeches, flapping its remaining wing desperately, knocking over vases of flowers and overturning sofas and tables. Dream watches as an icicle lances through its body like a shish kebab. With hardly a sound, the Garuda dissolves into dust, scattering across the hall.

It's only now that Dream can really calm down. Still, they've caused a commotion that would probably attract more Shadows. It's time they get going, wherever the vent would take them.

Techno and Sapnap have already returned to where the other Thieves are gathered. As soon as he steps through the doorway, he turns back into his human form, as does Fundy into a bipedal fox.

"Techno, are you okay?" Dream asks.

This is the most shaken Techno has looked ever since Dream met him. Shoulders drawn up, fingers fidgeting with the hem of his shirt, a troubled frown on his face as he leans against the wall. It must have been nightmarish to be grabbed like that, especially since they are virtually helpless.

"We found the vent," Techno says, shrugging. "Let's go."

Dream doesn't push the issue. He holds up a hand and leads the rest of the Thieves into the room, scurrying over to the vent and squeezing through it, making their way slowly but surely to the other side of the ship.

*

"Fresh air!" TapL cries.

They have finally emerged from within the ship's hallways, now finding themselves upon the ship's afterdeck, where the pool is located. There are many cognitive guests sunbathing on deckchairs, a few gathered by the ship's railing, looking out to the ruined sea.

"Seriously, I wanna get on a luxury cruise like this one day," Skeppy says with his hands behind his head. "But, like, a legit cruise."

"So do I," Fundy agrees.

"Well," Dream says, clapping his hands together. "What do you guys say to some recon?"

"You mean asking about Yukimura and Shore?" Eret asks.

"Yeah. There are so many people here; someone's got to know something."

The Thieves agree. Fundy sniffs out a safe room nearby and leads them to it. The safe room resembles that of a changing room, with wooden benches in the middle and an arsenal of swimming outfits, trunks and bikinis alike in fanciful colours and eccentric designs.

"We'll gather back here once we find out more," Dream says, and, splitting up, the Thieves set out.

*

"That woman over there...she's Yukimura," Bad says, tugging Dream away from the man he's

talking to. It's fine – that man is talking his ear off about the uniqueness of different brands of wine anyway.

“That woman?” The one that Bad seems to be gesturing to is a fair-skinned, bespectacled woman in a white bikini, a rose sewn onto the strap. She rests with several men fawning over her, fanning her, offering her food and drinks.

“Yeah, her,” Bad says. “Let's go talk to the othe-wait, where are you going?”

Dream strides up to the woman, his hands in his pockets. She seems to notice his approach, a scowl flitting across her face.

“What do you want?” she asks, boredom evident in her voice.

“Are you Yukimura?” Dream asks, unfazed.

“What if I am?” she says challengingly, leaning back against her deck chair, folding her arms. “I have no business with scrawny children like you. Shoo. Move along now.”

Well, they got shut down quick. And scrawny? Really?

“What are you doing?” Bad hisses, slapping a palm on Dream's shoulder. “Get back here!”

The duo returns to the safe room, where the rest of the Thieves are waiting. They perk up at Dream and Bad's arrival.

“Where were you guys?” TapL asks.

“We found Yukimura,” Dream says, “and she thinks we're scrawny kids.”

“We're not scrawny,” Skeppy huffs.

“There were a ton of men with her too,” Bad says. “I don't think we'd be able to approach her unless, we, uh...”

“Compete with those men?” Eret asks.

“Couldn't we just threaten her and fight if it comes down to it?” Techno asks.

“Maybe we should try a less violent option first,” Dream says placatingly. “Anyone's got hot bodies you wanna show off?”

“I volunteer Sapnap,” Fundy says. Sapnap's eyes bulge.

“What does *that* mean?”

“You can't even volunteer Fundy because he's a fox.” TapL laughs.

Dream sighs. This is going to be a long discussion.

*

“Why.”

“You look absolutely stunning,” Sapnap says with a snicker.

There are only four pairs of tight-fitting swimming trunks in the safe room, and after several

intense rounds of rock-paper-scissors, Techno, Sapnap and Skeppy emerge victorious.

Dream tugs on his pair of green trunks with rabbits dotted across the fabric. It's cute, but...well, he wouldn't want to be caught dead wearing it. It *may* look good on George though. Maybe he can consider convincing him to wear a pair in the future...

"For the Thieves," Bad murmurs. "This is for the Thieves..."

"Well," Eret says, striking poses in front of the full-length mirror in the corner of the room. "I think we look quite good, to be honest."

"You're not even looking at us!" TapL whines. "Look, this blue doesn't go with my nails!"

"Let's go," Dream says, a hand on his forehead. "The faster we get our letter of recommendation, the faster we can get the hell out of here."

"We'll back you up if need be," Fundy says. "Okay, get going!"

*

[Dream](#) knows they've got Cognitive Yukimura on the hook when she sits up as they approach, absolutely drinking in the sight of them. Despite the triumph bubbling in his chest, his self-consciousness is overwhelming. Moreover, the fact that he isn't wearing his mask...

"Good day." Eret is the one to take the lead. "How are you doing, Miss Ambassador?"

Cognitive Yukimura licks her lips. "Oh, I'm doing very well. What brings you here, Mr...?"

"Eret," Eret says, holding out a hand, which Cognitive Yukimura shakes. Dream can *feel* the glares of the other men. "I'd like to ask for a letter of recommendation, Miss Ambassador."

"A letter of recommendation?" Cognitive Yukimura repeats. "Whatever would you need one for?"

"We're all avid supporters of Mr Singh," Eret says. Dream can hardly believe how the lies are falling fluidly from his mouth, like he's born to do it. "However, to truly show our full support for him, we'd require access into--"

"I see, I see!" Cognitive Yukimura nods, eyes still darting from Thief to Thief. "You need access to the main chamber!" She holds a hand out to one of her men. "Pen please."

Another man hands her the letter, which she signs.

"Thank you so much," Eret says, reaching for the letter. "Now, if you'd excuse us--"

[Excuse](#) you? Did you really think I was going to hand this over for free?" Cognitive Yukimura hops to her feet, cocking her hips. "If you can entertain me, Mr Eret, perhaps I might--"

"Step away from him." Dream and TapL step between the two. This is going too far.

"More sculpted men to add to my collection!" Cognitive Yukimura looks absolutely pleased. "Amazing!"

"She's so messed up," TapL mutters. Bad calls out to the rest of their team who come running over, armed to the teeth. Dream and the others' costumes replace their swimming trunks at the presence of the threat, their masks appearing on their faces.

“Are you picking a fight with me?” Cognitive Yukimura growls. Black fire licks at her ankles. “Well, are you?”

“Hand over that letter and we won’t,” Dream says.

Cognitive Yukimura’s head is dipped, black ooze pouring from her orifices. Dream can hardly stand to look at her, grateful for the wall of flames that surrounds her. Other nearby cognitive guests start running, screaming as Shadow Yukimura emerges, taking the form of a massive, floating stingray, long tail swishing in the sky.

Gods, Dream wishes it didn’t come down to this...He draws dagger, watching as the cognitive men morph into their monstrous forms as well – mostly black goats with a dancing flame at the tip of their horns.

[“Eret.](#) Bad, TapL, with me,” Dream says. “Everyone else, deal with the other Shadows!”

They’ve only got so much time before reinforcements arrive. It’s time to wrap this battle up as quickly as possible. Shadow Yukimura lets loose a sound wave that pierces Dream’s ears, as if it’s rattling his brain in his skull. What kind of attack was that?

The hairs on Dream’s neck stands on end, giving him only a split second’s notice to duck as a blade slices thin air which would have slit his throat had he not been more careful. Dream whirls around and throws up his dagger, clang of metal ringing in his ears. His eyes widen.

“TapL?”

TapL’s eyes are dull, unfocused. Dream’s seen something like this before.

He remembers, back when they were facing a Leanan Sidhe in Kris’ Palace. The same thing had happened to Eret.

“Snap out of it, TapL!” Dream finds himself forced back by TapL’s immense strength, throwing his head back far enough for the axe’s blade to miss his neck by just a hair’s breadth. He does a somersault, kicking TapL’s axe from his hand, the weapon stabbing the wooden planks of the deck.

Dream summons Norn, splashing a pool of green upon TapL. The cloudiness is gone from his expression and disorientation takes over.

“What-?”

“You were brainwashed,” Dream says, plucking his axe from the ground and hurling it back to him, which TapL catches expertly. “Careful!”

Another sound wave assaults them and Dream plugs his fingers into his ears. The world wavers around him. Familiar faces are turning into Shadows before his very eyes, featureless monstrous beings rising from the ground, red eyes staring at him, ready to strike at any moment.

How are there so many Shadows? So many black...slimy...

A Shadow lunges at him, shoving him to the ground. A pink sphere slams into the floor where he once stood. Dream whips his dagger out, slashing at the Shadow, catching it across the face. The Shadow shrieks in pain, crimson blood spurting from the wound.

Wait.

Crimson?

The world shifts again and the Shadow clambers off him, a hand on its face. Dream leaps to his feet, ready to face the threat when the black sludge washes away, revealing Bad with his mask ripped off, blood trickling down his face.

[Dream](#) summons Norn once again, enveloping Bad in green light. Oh God, what has he *done*?

“Bad!” Skeppy shouts, stabbing a Shadow clean through the chest and tears across the deck.

“I’m fine,” Bad grits out. When he peels his hand away, Dream gapes. While one of Bad’s eyes has recovered, the other is a milky colour.

“Crap!” Skeppy draws up an ice shield around them, deflecting a couple of Shadow Yukimura’s attacks. He grabs Dream’s collar, veins popping from his temples. “What the actual fuck is wrong with you?”

“Skeppy, it’s not his fault!”

The next pink sphere shatters their shield. Skeppy simply replaces it with another one.

“We’re not fucking done here-“

“Language!”

“I don’t care about language right now, Bad! He fucking stabbed you-“

“I’m sorry.” Guilt rips at Dream as he casts his gaze at the ground. He’s almost taken Bad’s life, if he’d just drove the knife a little deeper...he would have...he wouldn’t have been able to forgive himself either.

A scream and a resounding thud alert them to the world outside their little ice dome.

“We’ll talk later.” Dream has never heard Skeppy so angry before. No, angry doesn’t even begin to describe it. Skeppy dismisses his ice shield with a wave of his hand, revealing Shadow Yukimura having now been defeated, transformed back into a human.

[Eret](#) retrieves the letter of recommendation from her pitiful person. He hands it over to Dream, who stuffs it with the other one in the deep recesses of his coat.

“What’s wrong?” Fundy asks, paws on his hips.

“It’s nothing,” Skeppy mutters and sheathes his sword, making his way over to the elevator at the other end of the pool.

“Dream?”

Dream is snapped from his trance, looking up to find Bad with his mask back snugly on his face and an apologetic smile.

“Sorry about Skeppy. I’ll try to get through to him.”

“No, I...”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Not even Norn's Diarahan can heal that wound, the blindness he's inflicted in that one eye. Dream bites his lip. The damage he caused is irreversible. How is Bad fine with it?

The other Thieves are already following Skeppy's lead, though Fundy hangs back with Dream.

"Hey."

Dream jerks his head up at that gravelly voice, at a man dressed in a white button-down and a stylish burgundy jacket. A golden chain hangs from his breast pocket. He drops his cigarette to the ground and grinds on it with a heel.

"Would you kids mind, y'know, not causing problems? The guests are all screamy and shit," the man says. "If this goes on, I may or may not have to erase you brats."

"Erase us?"

"I'm not gonna repeat myself," the man says, making a shooing gesture. "Now get the hell outta here."

He stalks off back towards the cabin hallways.

"That's one dangerous guy," Fundy says, shaking his head. "How did someone like *him* get up on this ship anyway?"

Dream doesn't know, but it'll be good not to get on his bad side. The whole "erasing them" business sounds scary as hell.

"You coming?" Sapnap jogs over to them. "Everyone's waiting."

Dream blinks. "Huh? O-Oh. Yeah, sure. Let's go."

He casts one last glance across the pool. Cognitive Yukimura has disappeared, as if she was never there to begin with. Turning back to the entrance to the hallway, he follows the Thieves.

*

"This is..." Dream's coat whips around him as he is met with a cold draft. The salty tang of the sea fills his nostrils as he finds himself staring at the ruins of their city as the ship cruises by. They're at the side of the ship, the balconies of several cabins above their heads.

Fundy sniffs the air. "There's a safe room nearby. Come on."

Dream scrunches his nose up at another stench that permeates the air. It smells like...engine oil. Must be coming from the vent over there...He follows the rest into the safe room, away from the prying eyes of this one Shadow patrolling the length of the deck.

[Dream](#) settles himself down on a couch. The constant transformations between mouse and human puts a lot of strain on their bodies, so much that his muscles are aching and there's this phantom feeling of a tail swishing about.

So much effort just for two letters of recommendation. Just three more to go.

Everyone seems to be gathered around Bad, especially Skeppy, who has one arm slung around his shoulder, worried expressions on their faces. Dream and Techno are the only ones who stay at their respective corners, just watching them.

Dream stares at the ground, a churning in his stomach he cannot quite get rid of.

After they've rested for a while, got their limbs stretched out, popped a few painkillers into their mouths, they're ready to go.

"We'll get the final letter, then we'll leave," Dream says. "We'll come back another day for the last two." They've got plenty of time; there's nothing to worry about.

As they leave the safe room, Dream is very much aware of Skeppy's penetrating glare drilling holes in the back of his head.

*

["Here"](#) it is. The casino," Eret says. "If our intel is sound, then that TV station president should be here."

"A TV station president, huh. He could be manipulating the media to paint Singh in a good light," TapL says.

The casino is just as flashy as the previous Palace, if not flashier. There are also high-ranking Shadows patrolling about as well, red auras flaring from their bodies.

How're they going to find Terrace now?

"Wait a minute," Sapnap says, squinting at someone currently seated at a card table, poring over his poker cards. "Isn't that the guy we saw at that TV station?"

"We went to a TV station?" Dream asks.

"The social studies field trip!" Fundy nods.

"I don't know how you remember something from that long ago," Bad mumbles. Yeah, neither can Dream.

"It doesn't hurt to check," Techno says.

Sapnap is already walking over, peering at the man's face ever so conspicuously.

["Yo,"](#) he says, holding up a hand in greeting. The man harrumphs, outright ignoring him. The croupier glares at him.

"Hey, I'm talking to you-" Sapnap starts, only for Techno to pull him back, shaking his head.

"What do you-oh. You're *him*," the Cognitive TV station president, Terrace, says. "You're the Detective Prince."

"Yes," Techno says. "Can we talk to you for a second, Mr Terrace?"

"I'm in the middle of a game here, Detective Prince," Cognitive Terrace says. "Keep it short and sweet."

Techno straightens his shoulders. "I'd like a letter of recommendation. For Singh's main hall."

"The main hall?" Cognitive Terrace asks. He looks up from his card game, meeting Techno's eyes.

"Yeah," Techno says. "I need to see him for personal matters."

Terrace hums. “And how do I know you’re not lying?”

“If you don’t give us the letter, I will leak the requests you’ve made.”

At this, Cognitive Terrace’s lips turn down in an ugly snarl. “What did you just say to me?”

“You heard me,” Techno says, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. “I’ll leak those favours you’ve been asking for.”

Requests? What is Techno talking about?

“Don’t threaten me,” Cognitive Terrace hisses. “You have secrets of your own too, Detective Prince. Don’t think I don’t know what.”

“Say it, then,” Techno drawls. “I have nothing to hide.”

[Cognitive](#) Terrace growls and spits at the ground, black flames circling his wrists and calves. Dream tenses. It looks like they’re going to have to settle this with a fight.

Shadow Terrace is without minions this time, rising from the pools of black ooze as an ape, armed with a gleaming cutlass and a crown atop its head. This one looks like a tough customer. From the way it’s hopping on the spot, ready to pounce on them, Dream anticipates a strike like a bolt from the blue.

Shadow Terrace does not fail to meet Dream’s expectations when it hurtles forward, slicing his arm, drawing blood. Dream clenches his jaw, casting a Diarahan.

“Sapnap, Eret, Techno, with me!” Dream shouts.

The Thieves break out into their respective formations, their efficiency honed by months of teamwork. Shadow Terrace launches itself off the wall, this time at Techno. Sapnap intercepts him, batting Shadow Terrace away, a stream of electricity frizzling it up.

Eret fires a barrage of arrows, the projectile sailing through the air, missing Shadow Terrace’s arm by mere inches. Shadow Terrace grips its blade in its jaw, rushing them on all four limbs. Techno hops into Anat just quick enough to avoid the attack, Shadow Terrace plunging its blade into the floor.

Already, Shadows are beginning to emerge from the ceiling and the walls, their amorphous bodies sliding along the carpet. Dream takes care of several with a couple of beams of ice before once more turning his attention to Shadow Terrace.

It’s too fast, its movements as fast as lightning, its body but a mere flicker of golden as it darts about the room from table to table, slot machine to slot machine. Chips and tokens begin to spill, more and more powerful Shadows gathering.

“Sapnap!” Eret shouts, Robin Hood nocking an arrow fizzling with sparks. “Duck!”

Sapnap drops to the ground and the arrow of white flies above his head, stabbing Shadow Terrace’s tail, pinning it to the wall. Sapnap rises and spins on his heels, slamming the cudgel as hard as he can into Shadow Terrace’s skull.

Shadow Terrace yelps, shrieking in pain as it pulls the arrow of light from its tail, black blood spraying the ground. Shadow Terrace makes a wide swing. Dream summons Mishaguji and raises his pistol, parrying the blow and firing off a charged bullet, straight into Shadow Terrace’s chest.

That does the trick. Shadow Terrace's monkey form melts away and he transforms back into a human, slumped over on the ground.

[Techno](#) jams his ray gun back into its holster and walks up to him. He squats down, hand held out to him.

"Letter of recommendation. Now."

Cognitive Terrace's expression is subdued, sighing as he reaches into his coat pocket, handing them something similar to what the previous two letters they had gleaned off Cognitive Said and Cognitive Yukimura. Techno inspects its contents before handing it to Dream, who places it with the other two letters within his coat pockets.

"I want to ask you some questions," Techno says. "The mental shutdowns. Is Singh behind it?"

"You—" Cognitive Terrace snaps, but one warning glance from Dream and the others has him cooperating. He lowers his head, nodding. No hint of shame or remorse. "It was...Singh offered."

"And you requested hits?"

"I didn't know what would have happened!"

"You went in knowing full well that someone was going to die," Techno says, voice raised.

"Didn't matter whether it was psychotic breakdowns or mental shutdowns."

"That is..."

"Wait, I'm so confused." TapL glances from Techno to Cognitive Terrace. "Was my father a hit?"

Techno remains silent. Cognitive Terrace shakes his head.

"I think that could have been Singh's idea," Cognitive Terrace says. "To deal with people he deems...problematic."

"My father was problematic?" TapL crosses the distance in quick steps, towering over Cognitive Terrace.

"He was delving too far into a world he didn't belong to," Cognitive Terrace says, with a snide grin. "If he hadn't been so ambitious and remained a businessman, perhaps he could have lived."

With one swing of his axe, Cognitive Terrace's head comes clean off. Bad gasps. Dream watches with knitted brows. Cognitive Terrace's body fades into dust. TapL's breaths are heavy, staring at the spot where Cognitive Terrace was seated.

Causing psychotic breakdowns and mental shutdowns to people that would hinder them, then choosing to blame it on the Phantom Thieves...Dream can't even begin to fathom how despicable that is. Moreover, as for the one behind the mental shutdowns...After all this, he and Dream would have a nice, long talk.

"Shadows," Fundy warns suddenly. Glancing back, Dream tenses as soon as he catches sight of the sheer number of Shadows gathering. Fundy takes the lead, dashing towards a door that would take them to another corridor flanked by cabin doors.

For now, they will have to focus on stealing Singh's heart and forcing him to change his vile ways.

[“We’re](#) right back where we started,” Bad complains.

They sure are. Having slammed open the only door at the end of the hallway, the Thieves ended up right back at the restaurant. Just the regular one, not the one reserved for members.

“And we still haven’t heard anything about Shore,” Eret says.

“Nor the Cleaner,” Fundy says.

“I think we can leave that for another time,” Dream says. From the look on everyone’s faces, they’re tired. Tired from transforming into mice and back again, tired from the continuous battles, tired from discovering painful truths.

Maybe it’s time to do them a favour and to return home for the day. The final two pieces of letters of recommendation can wait for another time. Dream slips a Goho-M from his coat pocket.

“That’s a good idea,” Sappnap says. Upon the other Thieves’ exhausted agreements, Dream tosses the Goho-M, enveloping them in a thick cloud of fog. When Dream next opens his eyes, they’re out on the front deck of the ship.

He slips his phone out and activates the Meta-Nav.

“Returning to the real world. Thank you for your hard work.”

*

[11/28 – SATURDAY – EVENING](#)

Clay flops onto the bed. For once, the new Phantom Thieves’ chat, the one without George in it, is quiet. No notifications popping up on his screen, his phone doesn’t buzz...

It’s too quiet, like there’s a hum in Clay’s ears that he cannot get rid of.

He stares up at the ceiling, eyes tracing a crack that spiders to the lone lightbulb in the middle.

Zak had opted to take Darryl back home and they’d go to the doctor tomorrow to get his eye checked – it was still blind even after they exited the Metaverse, and Clay fears that it would remain that way for the rest of Darryl’s life. Zak’s texted to meet up the night after tomorrow, and honestly, Clay is not looking forward to that.

Meanwhile, Nick has decided to unwind with his parents and Ant downstairs, leaving Clay up here alone with Floris. He needs time to think about things too.

“It’s not your fault, what happened to Darryl,” Floris says, tail swishing about. Clay hums noncommittally. “It’s...unfortunate, but that Shadow had brainwashed you.”

That didn’t help at all. Clay still feels downright awful. He’s got to make it up to Darryl somehow...

Clay falls into a troubled sleep that night. Everyone’s on edge. Stressed. With the election date looming over their heads, it doesn’t give them a lot of time to relax.

if anyone's interested:

shadow yukimura -> forneus

shadow yukimura's henchmen -> baphomet

shadow terrace -> hanuman

The Coming of Winter

Chapter Summary

s links! mainly tapl...sighs i gotta rush his since there aren't that many in-fic days left till dec 18. will wrap up some others as well!

Chapter Notes

i swear my last chapter hadn't meant for george angst to happen it just slipped out haha

there is a reason i couldnt finish eret's s link before 11/20 and thats because of his 2nd tier persona lol

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

11/29 – SUNDAY – DAYTIME

12/3 – THURSDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“Oh God, it’s *cold*.” Harvey shivers.

They are walking about Pointe Boulevard, trying to find a nice little outfit for Harvey to wear to a business meeting that would take place about a week later.

That’s right. A business meeting. Harvey, at eighteen, is attending a business meeting in place of his father. He shouldn’t be worrying about company ties and the global market now. If anything, he should be thinking about...about school, his SATs and relationships.

“I need a heater. Fast,” Clay says. His eyes train on a shop selling business suits and he leads Harvey over, ducking into it. The warmth of the shop simply thaws him. The first snow hasn’t fallen yet and it’s already this cold.

“Thank God,” Harvey says, rubbing his hands together.

Clay has got to be honest – while he may have come down to Pointe Boulevard before, with Eret, Nick and others – there’s a street that he’s never had the guts to go down, and that’s the one lined with boutiques selling the most expensive items of clothing that he has ever seen. Never has he seen two lines of zeroes on the price tag in his life. Is that even legal?

“Oh, my father used to wear this brand,” Harvey says, already checking out a greyish suit complete with a striped tie and golden cufflinks. Something tells Clay that that gold is real.

“You wanna try that on?”

Harvey nods. A saleswoman walks over, offering to help with whatever they need. The way Harvey speaks to him and the team is vastly different from how he talks to the saleswoman. Choosing his diction carefully, watching his phrasing and intonation. It must have come from years

of practice.

Clay finds himself waiting outside the changing room, eyes on his phone. Another customer enters the store just as Harvey emerges from the cubicle, the suit draped over an arm.

“Doesn’t really suit me,” Harvey says, returning the suit to the saleswoman with a smile. “I think I might try something else.”

“Sure.” Clay is certain that he’d never run out of suits to try. Not in this store.

Harvey turns back to the expanse of the shelves and marionettes of suits, only for his face to turn pale.

“What’s wrong?” Clay asks, following his gaze. He stiffens, realizing exactly whom he’s looking at. He has only met him twice in his life, and the second time wasn’t even the real him, but Clay is filled with a burning fury in the pits of his stomach.

It’s Samson, that disgusting man who had literally no respect for Harvey as a person. Harvey’s just managed to get out of an arranged marriage with him and he doesn’t need any more contact with that filthy man.

“Come on, let’s go,” Clay says, grabbing Harvey’s wrist. “We can always come back some other time.”

Unfortunately for them, Samson moves quickly as well, like a predator tailing its prey through tufts of tall grass. He strides across the store, standing before the exit and accompanied by two burly bodyguards. Clay grits his teeth. Samson’s been watching them – he’s sure of it.

“Where are you going, my dear Harvey?”

“Don’t call me that,” Harvey mutters. “Let us pass, Samson.”

Samson clicks his tongue. “No can do. I have a proposal for you, my dear.”

Clay opens his mouth to say something, only for Harvey to stop him with a hand on his shoulder.

“I have no business with you, Samson,” Harvey says. “The marriage has been called off.”

“That was my father’s business with yours,” Samson says, clicking his tongue. “Now, I’m offering you something you can’t refuse, Harvey.”

Clay narrows his eyes. Harvey looks equally confused. What does Samson have in mind?

“Be mine, Harvey, and I will help you keep your company afloat in this dog-eat-dog world,” Samson singsongs. “Your father’s no longer around and you know nothing about managing a company. Very soon, Lee Foods is going to crumble.”

Harvey straightens his back. “I…”

“Think about it,” Samson says. “If you care about your father, if you care about continuing what he left for you, then you’d accept my offer.”

Samson turns and exits the store, leaving a heavy atmosphere. Conflict rages in Harvey, evident from his knit brows and clenched fists.

“What should I…” Harvey stares at the ground. “What should I do now?”

“Tell him no,” Clay says. “You shouldn’t be forced into a marriage that...that’s going to ruin you, Harvey.”

“But what about the company?” Harvey sounds frustrated, storming out of the store and into the cold, Clay right behind him. The heat of that moment has melted away any frost that remains. “My father spent his whole life building that company up. Yes, it was on slave labour and...and other...”

Harvey trails off, gaze on the ground. “Sorry, Clay. I think...I need some time alone.”

Clay still walks him back to the station, because he can’t very well leave him alone now, can he?

Still, this guy’s going to be a problem since he knows exactly which buttons to push. Sure, they can attempt to change his heart by making use of Mementos, but ultimately, the decision lies with Harvey.

*

11/29 – SUNDAY – EVENING

“Hey.” Darryl’s voice crackles through Clay’s phone. “Just thought you’d like to know that I’m fine.”

“I’m really sorry, Darryl,” Clay says. There’s just no getting rid of that guilt clawing at him, the miserable scratching of his insides. “I-“

“Don’t worry about it,” Darryl interrupts. “I think I can go for some vision restoration therapy when I can afford it but for now, I’m, like, blind in that eye.”

There is a pause, and Clay isn’t sure what to feel about that.

“Oh, it’s not like it’s a total goner. I can still see shadows and stuff. I mean, not like *those* Shadows, but...like dark shapes.”

Clay nods, even though Darryl can’t see him.

“Clay? You still there?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I am.”

“Oh, by the way, Zak still wants to meet tomorrow, but I’m gonna be there to mediate, so you don’t have to worry about that,” Darryl says. “He’s calmed down a lot too.”

That’s a relief. Clay thanks Darryl for the update, and proceeds to plug his phone into the charger. While it may not have quelled the brewing storm of anxiety in his heart, that call helped, even if it’s just a little.

*

11/30 – MONDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“I guess it’s time to say goodbye.”

Timothy nods, watching as Ant pads down the staircase with something in its mouth – the tiny blanket that it must have gotten attached to during its stay here.

Timothy scoops Ant up into his arms, the cat purring. It stretches its paws at Clay, motioning to the collar around its neck. Does it want the collar removed? Clay unclasps the collar, the nametag clinking, Velvet's name shining in the living room light.

"I think it wants you to keep it," Timothy says. "As a thank you."

Ant nods, and Clay can feel the depths of its gratitude. Gaining Timothy's trust is a starting point, and slowly but surely, the prejudice against him would disappear. Clay is sure of that.

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast turned a vow into a blood oath. It shall become the wings of rebellion and break the yoke of thy heart. Thou hast awakened to the ultimate secret of the Devil, granting thee infinite power...

There's no doubt that Clay and Ant would see each other again, since they're going to live near each other, after all.

Ant leaves with Timothy that day, purring with a promise that their bond will never be broken.

*

11/30 – MONDAY – EVENING

"Sorry about the other day," Zak says, running a hand through his hair with a hint of shame. "I got mad but like..."

"I have to apologize again too," Clay says, dipping his head. "If only I could resist that--"

"See? This is why I'm here," Darryl says with a huff. It's hard not to feel guilty when he's sporting that eye patch, a tiny scar across his nose. "If I leave it up to you two, you're just going to keep apologizing over and over and over again."

Zak and Clay call silent.

"Just shake hands and say, 'Let's be friends again.'"

Neither speak for the longest time. Reluctantly, Clay reaches his hand out across the table. Zak takes it.

"Okay," Darryl says. "Now say 'Let's be friends again.'"

Clay bites the insides of his cheeks to keep himself from smiling.

"Let's be friends again," Clay and Zak say in unison, before bursting into raucous laughter, drawing the attention of several other diners.

"Great, so you guys are friends again," Darryl says. "We should get some muffins to celebrate."

"Celebrate what?" Zak tries to catch his breath.

"Celebrate you guys being friends again," Darryl says. "Let's get muffins."

*

12/1 – TUESDAY – EVENING

"This is..." Caroline squints at the porch to Clay's current residence. "Inmate, is this where you

live?"

"Yeah," Clay says, suddenly self-conscious. Nick did mention that the three of them would be out for tonight, headed their aunt's way for a late Thanksgiving dinner, leaving Clay and Floris the entire house to themselves.

"Perhaps we would gain insight into how his living environment has left an impact on his rehabilitation," Justine says.

Clay unlocks the door and leads them in. He switches the light on, the bulbs flickering to life. The living room is just like how Clay remembers it, all neat and everything. They don't live a luxurious life despite Mr Armstrong's apparent wealth but at least their abode is a cosy one.

"Oh yeah, you have to take off your shoes..." Clay starts, only to realize that neither twin tracks any obvious clumps of dirt or dust into the house. Well, if that's the case, then what Mrs Armstrong doesn't know won't hurt her.

"What does this do?" Caroline asks, voice travelling from the kitchen.

The kitchen.

Oh God.

Clay rushes to the kitchen, just in time to keep Caroline from turning on the stove and potentially setting the house on fire.

"We use that to cook," Clay says.

"Cook? Oh, you mean sustenance." Caroline looks uninterested, at least, until Clay shows her exactly what it does. Clay doesn't like that sparkle in her eye.

A loud blaring from the living room has Clay running out of the kitchen with Caroline in tow. Justine has switched the television on to a yoghurt commercial.

"Isn't this one of those screens we saw at the theatre?" Caroline asks. "Why's it so small?"

"Because it wouldn't fit in the house otherwise," Justine says.

"Why would you have a tiny screen when you can just go to the theatre to watch from a big one?" Caroline asks, joining Justine on the couch.

"The big ones only play movies. Sometimes we'd like to watch other things like...uh...the news."

"That does not sound entertaining in the slightest," Justine says with a frown.

"Or we can watch cartoons," Clay says, wondering if they're subscribed to Cartoon Network or something. The Armstrongs don't seem like the type to, but it's worth a shot.

They actually are and Phineas and Ferb comes on. God, Clay hasn't watched that in forever. Justine and Caroline are entranced by it, hugging the cushions on the couch, eyes trained on the screen as Doofenshmirtz unveils his new invention. Clay sighs in relief, heading into the kitchen to grab himself some water.

However, the moment he returns, Justine is fast asleep and Caroline is missing. A crash resounds from above and Clay slams his cup on the table, water nearly sloshing over its rim and he dashes up the stairs.

“What the fuck!” Floris bounds towards him. “What was that?”

That is probably Caroline, causing chaos somewhere. In their room, probably, judging from the fact that Floris has been scared out of his wits. When Clay arrives, all he sees is a pile of books and stationery on the ground, with Caroline standing over the mess, a terrified expression on her face.

Thank goodness those are all *his* books, and not any of Nick’s. Well, not like Nick would care, if he thinks about it. Sighing, he picks the books and pens up, while Caroline watches on, still standing shell-shocked.

She regains her composure pretty quickly, though, for someone who looked so guilty.

“What are those?” she asks, stabbing her baton in the direction of the stacks of books.

“Textbooks. Homework,” Clay says. “Education.”

“Education?”

“Yeah,” Clay says. “It’s, like, learning about stuff.”

“Learning?” Caroline pulls a frown. “What do you have to learn about other than fusing Personas and fighting Shadows?”

Clay doesn’t know whether he wants to laugh or just stare at her, stunned.

“Well, I think when you learn about different kinds of stuff you’ll have a broader worldview,” Clay says. “It’s not obvious now, but when you delve into different subjects, you get to study different people’s perspectives on different topics.”

“Huh.” Caroline looks unconvinced but nods anyway.

“You could call it rehabilitation in a way,” Clay says, shrugging. “Every time we learn something new, we’re improving ourselves. Academics is just one side of learning.”

“So learning about...about history broadens your worldview?”

“I should think so,” Clay says, scratching his head. “You learn about what people did in the past, what they thought, why they did what they did. That sort of thing.”

“Then what about arithmetic?” Caroline asks, staring down at his mathematics textbook.

“Arithmetic trains you to, uh, think systemically, probably,” Clay says. “You’re learning a soft skill through math.”

“Oh.” Caroline places the book back on the stack.

“Anyway, I think you guys should get going,” Clay says. “Nick and the others are going to be back soon.”

“Nick?” Caroline repeats as Clay shepherds her down the staircase, waking a drooling Justine.

“My friend,” Clay says. “Alright, alright. Now that you’ve seen where I live, it’s back to the Velvet Room with you.”

“The cartoon was entertaining, to a certain extent,” Justine says, ducking her head as she wipes drool from her chin.

“And the inmate does his learning upstairs,” Caroline says, hands on her hips.

“Does he?” Justine looks crestfallen. “I would have liked to inspect the inmate’s homework...”

No way is Clay going to let the twins look at his worksheets. Absolutely not.

“In any case, it seems that the secret to a successful rehabilitation is the balance of work and play,” Caroline says. “He watches the screen to relieve stress and manages his learning when he’s at the desk.”

Clay nods. “Sounds about right.”

“Balance...” Justine mumbles, her voice so soft that Clay can hardly hear her. “Thesis...and antithesis...”

“Huh? What did you say?” Caroline cups her ear. Justine shakes her head, looking down at her clipboard.

“This is the last assignment on this list,” Justine says. “You have done well, inmate.”

“Yeah, but don’t get cocky!” Caroline says. “There’s much more than you can learn.”

“Indeed.” Justine nods. “Now, we must go.”

Clay doesn’t feel like he’s grown very much at all despite all these assignments. Although, he’s probably gotten a little more mature ever since having to babysit the two of them.

It’s somewhat refreshing when he looks back upon his experiences. Explaining things to Justine and Caroline had really opened his eyes to lessons he’d never learn, things he would not have noticed otherwise. In a sense, he’s grateful to them, for this random list that came out of nowhere.

He walks the twins back to the Velvet Room at Valentine’s, pretending that he doesn’t care too much about those three dollars he’s just spent travelling to and fro.

*

12/2 – WEDNESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“I heard you and Zak got into an altercation,” Eret says, as they stand at an observation deck overlooking the lake at Helen Park.

“Yeah, well...it’s fine now,” Clay scuffs his shoes against the gravel.

“Really? Then that’s good.”

“So, why’d you bring me out here?” Clay asks, wrapping his arms around himself. “No offence, but it’s freezing.”

“Oh, um, sorry about that,” Eret says with a laugh. It hasn’t even started snowing but the chilly drafts are enough to freeze Clay’s ears off. His cheeks hurt. He digs something out from his pocket, a piece of paper – a printout of his original project plan that he had shown Clay the last time.

“This is...to thank you,” Eret says. “This plan is taking off rather well. I’d like to let you know since you can’t come to school right now.”

“That’s really good.” Clay accepts the piece of paper from him, the original initiatives’ details elaborately written out on it.

“It’s coming to the end of my term as president, and I’m hoping that the other ideas and initiatives I’ve got planned would do as well as the ones already implemented.”

“What about the other Council members?”

“They’re very on board with the idea,” Eret says. “Honestly, I think this can go really far.”

Clay nods. The lake is rippling, fishes dancing below the water.

“I have to thank you, Clay,” Eret says, “for, well, being my mentor in this area of life.”

“It’s no problem.”

“Maybe sometimes, following the rules isn’t the only way to go about doing things. We have to do things with heart, by listening to the people around us. That’s what makes a good leader.”

A good leader, huh? Clay nods.

“For the sake of the Thieves, for this last operation of ours,” Eret says, holding out a hand, which Clay shakes firmly, “I am willing to lend you my strength to its fullest potential.”

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast turned a vow into a blood oath. Thy bond shall become the wings of rebellion that break the yoke of thy heart. Thou hast awakened to the ultimate secret of the Emperor, granting thee infinite power...

[A shape](#) flickers over Eret’s head in the shape of a slender figure with boxy limbs, a bow in hand and a flaming arrow in the other. Its body glows with a plethora of colours, a determined expression on its face, its hair a blazing flame. Prometheus nods, meeting Clay’s eyes, before fading away into the wintry backdrop.

Clay sneezes, and Eret laughs.

“Shall we head back? The leader of the Phantom Thieves can’t be catching a cold on us.”

*

[12/3 - THURSDAY - AFTER SCHOOL](#)

“Business books?”

“Yeah. If I’m going to have to take over the company, I’m gonna have to start learning some basic investment and stuff,” Harvey says, perusing the books at the university town’s bookstore. The words on the books’ spines swim before Clay’s eyes. Books on economics, books on finance...this bookstore appears to hold every single tome under the sun.

“Oh, about that,” Clay says, reaching out to pick out a book from the shelf. “Has anything happened to the company? Are people still trying to pressure you into-“

“Kinda, but it’s not as bad as it was in the beginning,” Harvey says. “I think it’s because things have settled down some.”

“Did you consult that guy? Your father’s friend or something?”

“Oh, Mr Kumar?” Harvey nods. “Yeah, I’ve been speaking with him. And, um...he’s trying to push for the marriage with...you know, that...him.” Ah, *him*. The man that Clay has been doing his hardest to forget about.

“Why would he do that? Doesn't he know that you hate that guy?”

“He’s been saying it’s for the good of both companies,” Harvey says, dropping his gaze. "The same thing Samson's been saying."

“But he...Have you tried speaking to Mr Kumar about it?”

“Not yet,” Harvey says. “He just said it in a passing comment and he was in a hurry, so I didn’t have the time.”

“Maybe talk with him again and see how it goes?” Clay suggests. “You shouldn’t be forced into an abusive marriage for the sake of your company.”

Harvey’s laugh lacks mirth. “If I didn’t have my father’s legacy on my shoulders, then maybe.”

It’s almost sad how Harvey returns to browsing the books with a strange sort of silence hanging over them. After putting in so much effort to get out of that marriage, is it truly Harvey’s fate to return to it? The worst of the situation is that part of Harvey has already resigned himself to it.

Harvey leaves that bookshop with several books in hand, claiming that he’d put his utmost effort into studying up on the trade.

Clay leaves that bookshop with worry that keeps his stomach churning even on the train ride home.

*

Chapter End Notes

strength arcana rank 3 -> 4 (tapl)
devil arcana rank 9 -> 10 MAX (AntF.)
Guts +5 (watched movie)
aeon arcana rank 8 -> 9 (Justine and Caroline)
emperor arcana rank 9 -> 10 MAX (eret)
Kindness +3 (did housework)
strength arcana rank 4 -> 5 (tapl)
Guts +5 (gamed with nick)

First Snow

Chapter Summary

more s links and some revelations

Chapter Notes

i really really need to finish up tapl's s link before the next infiltration chap IM SO SORRY I RUSHED IT

"when i don't want to deal with bad, i have you."

i was like "omg" when skeppy said that. god im so behind on whats happening with the badlands on dream smp

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

12/4 – FRIDAY – EVENING

“Is Darryl’s eye still giving him problems?”

Clay nods. “He’s trying to get used to it, last I checked, so we’re going to have to put off our infiltration for a while.”

Blade hums. “Maybe when he’s feeling better, we can use Mementos as a training ground first. And we can’t put him in the starting line-up.”

He wonders how Darryl would think about that, whether it would make him feel guilty, like he’s not pulling his weight. God knows Clay would. Then again, it’s not like he’s totally blind, but Clay does fear that putting him on the frontlines may hurt him even more.

Using Mementos as a training ground sounds like a good suggestion, though.

“It’s weird being the one called out here instead of me calling you,” Blade says. The two of them are far from civilisation, strolling along the boardwalk at Mauve Beach. “What did you want to talk about?”

“I think you know what I want to talk about,” Clay says, shrugging. “Or you could take a wild guess.”

“Probably something to do with Singh, isn’t it?” Blade says, stopping by a jetty. A ship’s horn sounds in the background.

“Yep.” Clay finds a bench and settles there, drinking in the sights of the sea, at the waves rolling in the distance. “He’s your dad, isn’t he? You kinda let that slip really obviously.”

Blade laughs. “Yeah, I did. Worst mistake of my life.”

“So you’ve been researching into him?”

“It’s not easy becoming a teenage detective, Clay,” Blade says. “If I wanted to expose my father for the terrible things he’s been doing, I needed ammo.”

“You became a detective to get access to evidence.”

Blade stares at Clay as if he’s stupid. “Well, yeah.”

“And this ammo was that entire file that you showed us.”

“Yeah.”

[Clay](#) lets that sink in. He admires Blade’s tenacity, his resolution to take down his father through the only way he knows how. Even though it may not have worked, when Singh’s influence is too widespread and too powerful to really defeat using orthodox methods, Clay still applauds it.

“Then what about what that guy said? Terrace?” Clay asks. “You said he was making requests for something.”

“Oh, that,” Blade says, nodding. “It was something I found out during my investigation. Believe me, I didn’t know anything about the Metaverse.”

Right, because the one who had been carrying out the assassinations, unfortunately, was George.

“The thing is, the psychotic breakdowns and mental shutdowns started right before my father became a congressman,” Blade says. “And they were usually politicians or other important people like CEOs and police superintendents. They were always someone who shares some ties with him. Somehow.”

“He was trying to eliminate anyone who would get in his way,” Clay says.

“Yeah, most likely,” Blade says.

“Did he ever reach out to you?”

“Well, no,” Blade says. “I had a nice foster family, then I met Phil and Wilbur and the others.”

Something seems to click in Clay’s brain. “Wait, if George had been the one doing the assassinations and it had been Singh who was heading it, then…”

“George and Singh are related in some way,” Blade says, shrugging. “I don’t have to tell you how, do I?”

“That sick bastard,” Clay mutters, bunching the fabric of his hoodie in his hands. “He really doesn’t care for anyone other than himself, does he?”

“No. No, he doesn’t. And that’s how he’s becoming the most powerful man in the country.”

Clay hates it. He hates how the world rewards selfishness and punishes kindness, how the most despicable man can succeed but the most genuine person can remain at the bottom of society’s ladder.

Despite the confirmations Clay’s coaxed out of Blade today, he still isn’t quite sure that the man’s told him everything. Still, he can work on it. One sliver of information by one sliver.

*

12/5 – SATURDAY – DAYTIME

Me: hi who wants to go to mementos

Me: tomorrow or like monday

Me: Darryl u good?

Zak: he went to buy groceries and left his phone behind

Zak: I'll ask him later

Me: ok great

Eret: I don't mind

Nick: same but can we go in on monday i got work tomorrow

Harvey: yep

Clay puts down his phone, his fingers itching to pick it up again once he turns his attention to his textbooks lying open on the table.

It's the start of his examinations straight after the election date, and in Mrs Armstrong's eyes, Phantom Thievery does *not* take precedence over his schoolwork.

*

12/5 – SATURDAY – EVENING

“This is your house?” Clay looks utterly bamboozled. “Wait, actually?”

“Yeah,” Harvey says, nodding. “Oh, and we're supposed to meet Mr Kumar inside.”

He finally managed to get a hold of him. Clay nods, feeling especially out of place in a penthouse as lavish as this one. Just like Nick's, Harvey's household requires guests to remove their shoes as well. Unlike Nick's, there are manservants and maids who attend to their every need.

“He should be here soon,” Harvey says, leading Clay over to the drawing room, the chamber itself larger than Clay and Nick's bedroom. Clay sits down, fingers running along the edge of his phone nervously. It feels like his general presence is an intrusion.

The doorbell rings and Harvey heads out to the front to receive his guest.

Mr Kumar is a short, stout man, dressed smartly in a waistcoat and dress pants. He doesn't seem to be surprised to see Clay already seated at the table, and Clay stands to greet him with a handshake.

“This is Clay,” Harvey says. “He's the friend that I was telling you about.”

Mr Kumar nods, and seats himself upon Harvey's invitation. “It's nice to meet you, Clay.”

Clay nods stiffly. This guy seems pleasant, but one should not judge on first appearances.

“What was it that you'd like to talk to me about?” Mr Kumar asks.

“About the...the marriage,” Harvey says. “The marriage that’s supposed to unite our companies.”

Mr Kumar nods. “Have you come to a decision?”

“I...I don’t want to go through with it,” Harvey says, shaking his head.

“Are you sure?” Mr Kumar asks, eyes wide. “Did something happen between you and-“

“He’s trying to take advantage of the fact that I am inexperienced in this area,” Harvey says. “He doesn’t treat me like a human being at all, but as an asset.”

Mr Kumar appears shocked at that. “Whatever do you mean?”

[Harvey](#) tells him all about it, about the abuse, about the way Samson wants to use him. Mr Kumar listens intently, with more sincerity than Clay expected. Had they been wrong about him the whole time?

“I see. I had no idea. The boy always looked civil. I never realized what evils he could have been hiding behind that polite smile of his,” Mr Kumar says, frowning.

“Wait, so you believe me?” Harvey gapes.

“Why wouldn’t I?” Mr Kumar asks. “You are no less mature than anyone else, least of all Samson.”

Harvey raises a brow.

“I believed that the marriage had been for the best of both companies, but if it would put you in such a position, then I would advise against it.” Mr Kumar leans forward. “No, I would do everything in my power to make sure the marriage wouldn’t go through.”

Harvey can hardly express his joy, and Mr Kumar can tell. He chuckles.

“You’re your father’s son, after all,” Mr Kumar says. “I was close to your father, you know, when he was younger. He had a noble goal – to provide everyone with affordable and healthy food, and that’s when he started Lee Foods.”

“Because we were poor, right?” Harvey says, dipping his head.

“Indeed,” Mr Kumar says. “However, the bigger Lee Foods grew, the greedier your father became.” Mr Kumar shakes his head. “He was obsessed with power and would stop at nothing to get it.”

“I see.”

“But he cared a lot about you before that, though,” Mr Kumar says. “I just thought I’d let you know.”

Harvey nods. “Yeah. I remember.”

An uncomfortable silence hangs over them.

“Is that all you’d like to talk to me about?” Mr Kumar asks.

“Yeah. Pretty much.”

Mr Kumar rises. "I will see myself out then, Harvey. I will assist you to the best of my ability, as the heir to Lee Foods."

Mr Kumar leaves, a manservant attending to him. Harvey remains seated, trying to contain himself, but it is hard to hide it when elation pours from every pore of his body.

"Good for you!" Clay claps a hand on his shoulder.

"Right!" Harvey grins. "Oh my God, I didn't think it would go over *that* well. Mr Kumar is the CEO of Kumar Electronics too, if you haven't realized." Clay is impressed. Kumar Electronics is, right now, one of the most popular electronics products on the market.

"With him backing you up, I think you can focus on that business of yours," Clay says with a nod.

"I will bring Lee Foods up again," Harvey says, with a firm resolution blazing in his eyes. "But not the way my father did it."

It won't be easy, not with the tarnish on Lee Foods' name right now, but Clay has no doubt that Harvey would be able to pull it off.

Harvey sees him off at the train station and Clay makes his way back home. They're going into Mementos tomorrow and he's got to make sure he's rested well enough.

*

12/6 – SUNDAY – DAYTIME

"What do you think of the coffee?" Harvey asks.

"It's good," Eret says, placing the cup back on the saucer. "Although..." He glances around. "Where are the others?"

"Um..."

"He probably chose the people who look like they can appreciate coffee," Blade says with a laugh. He jerks his cup at Clay. "I don't know why he's here, though."

"Excuse me," Clay huffs. "I can appreciate coffee just fine."

"Still, this is a very nice house," Eret says, glancing around. "You live here?"

"Well...yeah," Harvey says, nodding. "Look, can we just focus on the coffee? I can give you a house tour later."

"It's...bland," Blade says. "And I'm not even a connoisseur."

"You didn't have to add that last part."

Clay takes a sip of his coffee. It doesn't have the strongest taste, but he thought it's pretty good. Or rather, like normal coffee.

Harvey drinks from his cup as well, scrunching up his nose. "Yeah, you're right. It's bland."

"Did you make the coffee yourself?" Eret asks, plucking a cookie from the plate in the middle of the table and biting down on it.

Harvey nods. “Yeah. I’m not too familiar with roasting and blending and stuff like that yet, though.”

“If it’s your first time, it’s alright,” Blade says, finishing his cup. “What’s this for, anyway?”

“I’m gonna start a chain of cafés,” Harvey says. “If Lee Foods is going to make a comeback, it’s going to be through legitimate means and not, like, unethical stuff.”

“That’s good,” Eret says. “I admire that.”

“After you got the first store set up, can I work there?” Clay asks.

“Are you trying to get free food off him?” Blade mutters, picking up a cookie and chomping down.

“What? No.”

“Employee discount, maybe,” Eret says with a small smile. The room bursts into laughter.

The afternoon is filled with an easy sense of calm. Just chatting between friends. Clay can hardly bring himself to leave, not even as the sun begins to set behind the city skyline. Harvey thanks them all for coming and walks them to the train station.

“When’s your meeting?” Clay asks.

“My meeting? Oh, uh...on the ninth,” Harvey says. “I’ll be fine, if you’re worried.”

Well, Clay is, but he trusts Harvey too to make the right choice for both his own happiness and for the success of the company. There’s always a starting point for everything, and for Harvey, this is going to be his.

*

[12/7 – MONDAY – DAYTIME](#)

“The Meta-Nav’s reacting,” Eret says, peering over Dream’s shoulder.

Dream nods. There appears to be new areas which have opened up; Mementos is expanding.

“We haven’t been down here in a while,” Fundy says. He bounds over to the stationary escalator that brings them down to the lower floors. “Come on, let’s go.”

Perhaps it would do them some good to explore the new areas. The Paths of Adyeshach and Sheriruth, hmm?

*

“The Shadows are getting stronger.” Skeppy hums as they sit in the back of the Fundybus, zooming by Shadows they have no business with.

“Yeah,” Bad says. He’s doing better than Dream expected. While his accuracy is not the best, he makes up for it in raw firepower. He seems fine remaining in the backup team, with Skeppy offering to fight with him.

“This is...how many floors are we in now?” Sapnap asks.

Dream consults the Meta-Nav. They’re in the twelfth area of the Path of Adyeshach, which would

put them at around...the fifty-first floor?

“We’re here,” Techno says. Their journey around Mementos has become much smoother ever since Techno has taken over the driving. At least there aren’t any more sharp turns that would throw Clay against the doors of the vehicle.

Fundy turns back into his animal form and they head down the escalator, bringing them down to the next floor where a familiar door lined with even more spidery, crimson veins lie ahead of them. As the Thieves approach, the door opens up, revealing another escalator that would take them even further down.

“Just how many floors are there?” TapL cries.

“I don’t know,” Dream says. There’s still the Path of Sheriruth that they’ve yet to explore. From experience, it doesn’t seem like this path would be any shorter than the last few. Given that the Path of Adyeshach has thirteen...maybe the Path of Sheriruth would have fourteen?

“We’re getting close to the end,” Fundy says. “I can feel it.”

“Maybe the next path’s the last one,” Techno says.

“Alright, guys,” Dream says. “Let’s go.”

*

“The door’s not opening.”

The Path of Sheriruth housed the most ruthless Shadows, ones that hunt them down as soon as they come into their sights. Techno had an extremely fun time dodging them all, ferrying them from one platform to the next. They are only forced to fight a couple of times, and Dream misses those times when Shadows could just be beaten by a single gunshot to the forehead.

Now, on the final platform on what may be the final path, they find themselves blocked once more by the same red door that had obstructed them previously.

“Maybe we need more people to believe in us,” Fundy says, pressing a paw against the door.

“We literally had the entire state looking for us at one point,” Sapnap says, folding his arms. “What more do they want?”

“Then maybe we need the entire country,” Dream says, shoving his hands into his pockets. “Once we steal Singh’s heart, we can come back here and explore the depths of Mementos.”

Fundy nods approvingly. “Sounds like a plan.”

“Alright, are we done here?” Techno asks. “We can’t exactly go forward with that slab of stone in the way.”

The Thieves agree. Dream reaches into his pocket and fishes out his final Goho-M, hurling it to the ground and enveloping them in a thick shroud of fog.

When Dream next opens his eyes, he’s standing at the entrance of Mementos again. He makes a mental note to himself to head home and make more Goho-Ms as he grabs his phone, activating the Meta-Nav.

“Returning to the real world. Thank you for your hard work.”

*

12/9 – WEDNESDAY – EVENING

Harvey flops onto the bench, body bathed in sweat, as is Clay's. Clay settles down next to him, muscles straining with the effort of keeping himself upright.

"That was intense." Harvey takes a deep breath.

"Nothing like a good run," Clay agrees, looking out towards the lake at Helen Park.

Harvey nods. He takes a swig of the canteen on his vest.

Helen Park is quiet at this time of the day, save for joggers and cyclists, as per usual. Even the lake is empty now, nothing but a plain landscape of water that stretches as far as the eye can see.

"How was the meeting?" Clay asks. "Did you secure any business deals or anything?"

"Well, Mr Kumar was the one settling most things," Harvey says, chuckling. "Lee Foods is now merging with both Kumar Electronics and the Atlus Foundation. So, like a conglomerate merger."

Clay has no idea what that means, but it's probably something good if Harvey is smiling like that.

"Samson backed off," Harvey says. "Turns out he's been embezzling company funds and now the Samson Group's under inspection. If everything goes well, I don't think we'll be seeing much of him anytime soon."

"That's good to hear."

"I'm gonna be discussing about the café chain stuff with Mr Kumar sometime soon. You'll be my number one barista. How about that?"

Clay laughs. "Oh my God, you're actually serious."

Harvey pouts. "If you're not going to take my offer..."

"I'll consider it."

"Wow. Hey, I'm the one giving you a job here."

It's invigorating, spending time out here in the quiet of the park with a friend. From the very bottom of his heart, Clay does believe that Harvey would succeed in this venture, that he would be able to bring glory to his father's company once more.

They part ways at the train station, and Clay heads straight on home.

*

12/11 – FRIDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

Darryl: hello I think im good to go soon!

Darryl: should we go in on the 14th? I need to bring rat to the vet on the 13th

Harvey: rat?

Harvey: you have a pet rat?

Nick: his dog

Harvey: oh

Me: yeah sounds good

Blade: ok lets go in on the 14th

Eret: yep im ok

Me: right then, we'll gather right outside the Parliament Building on the 14th alright?

There is unanimous agreement amongst the Thieves, and Clay decides that it's time to go back to studying.

*

12/12 – SATURDAY – DAYTIME

“You know how Lee Foods started, Clay?” Harvey asks. “It was actually from very humble beginnings.”

“Providing affordable and healthy food to people, right?”

“Yeah.” Harvey looks up at the billboard of a Big Bang Burger outlet. The place has significantly fewer customers than it would have had a couple of months ago, before Andre Lee's crimes had been exposed.

“Well, it was my father's dream not to let anyone worry about food, no matter their income level,” Harvey says. “At one point in time, he even started a food donation drive once our outlets got big enough.”

“I wonder what made him change.”

“I don't know either.” Harvey sighs and they continue their stroll down the streets of Valentine Hills. “It could have been power. Or, like, money. Now we wouldn't know.”

They wouldn't.

“You know his Treasure? That model spaceship?” Harvey says. “I saw it before in the house. Mr Kumar told me he wanted it so badly when he was a child, but because of their poverty, he couldn't.”

“The Treasure is the root of their twisted desires,” Clay says. “Maybe your father wasn't just driven by his noble cause, but also the want for financial security. And once he's got that, he aimed bigger.”

“So he wasn't as pure of heart as we thought he was.”

“And that's natural, as much as we hate it,” Clay says. “Everyone has some form of twisted desires. It's how we decide to act because of it that makes us who we are.”

“O-Oh.” Harvey bites his lip. “Well, I'm not gonna walk down the same path.”

Clay nods, sensing his determination behind that expression.

“Oh, here’s the café,” Harvey says, stopping in front of a fine establishment, a familiar café that Darryl had taken him before, but most of their dishes had been especially expensive, so they could only order the cheapest items.

Not that Clay is going to mooch money off Harvey. Absolutely not.

*

12/12 – SATURDAY – EVENING

“Help me. I’m drowning.”

“No you aren’t,” Floris says. “You’ve barely touched your Spanish.”

“I don’t *need* Spanish when I grow up!”

“Oh shut up. You may not need Spanish, but you need to pass your exams,” Nick says.

He’s got a very good point there. Clay sighs, pick his pen up, and returns to his work. He doesn’t get very far before he’s tempted to scroll through his Twitter again.

“Oh, I’ve been meaning to ask, but what are you gonna do about...about *him*?” Nick asks.

Clay puts his pen down. “After we settle Singh’s Palace, he’ll have no reason to murder anyone anymore. Then we’ll have a nice, long talk and hopefully he can atone for his crimes.”

“Wait, what?” Nick looks confused. “What’s this about his reason to murder people?”

“Based on Blade’s investigation, we figured that George might be...Singh’s illegitimate son.” And by extension, Gina is his illegitimate daughter. “And he’s working with him. To get rid of competition.”

“Seriously?” Nick shakes his head, in no mood for studying either. “What the hell? So Singh ordered you dead?”

“Probably. Or maybe the one he ordered dead is ‘the leader of the Phantom Thieves’,” Clay says. “And with a cruel twist of fate...”

“It had to be you,” Floris mumbles.

Clay nods.

“Let’s not think about that now,” Nick says. “We’re going to steal Singh’s heart, right? Then after that, you can reconcile with lover boy.”

Clay smiles. “Yeah. You’re right.”

What he wouldn’t do to see George smile genuinely again...

*

12/13 – SUNDAY – DAYTIME

“What’s this?” Clay asks, reading the cursive writing on the laminated piece of paper that Harvey’s

handed to him.

“It’s a draft menu for my new café,” Harvey says. “I mean, I haven’t got the details sorted out yet, but Mr Kumar found this nice lot. Right here.” He gestures to an unused store, a sign hanging out front informing that the place would be undergoing serious renovations soon.

“That’s pretty near our house. We can come visit you often.”

“Really?” Harvey’s eyes are sparkling.

“Yeah, really.” Clay’s eyes scan the menu, offering coffee with names that he’s never heard of before, with tiny words detailing the types of the beans, the other ingredients used in its brew, and more. There are also non-caffeinated drinks and exotic pastries that Clay has no inkling what they’re like.

However, the prices are lower than other cafés Clay’s been to. Definitely affordable.

“This is just the draft,” Harvey says. “We’ll adjust prices and everything later, and the workers, and...” He doesn’t look stressed. If anything, he appears excited, ecstatic, his smile infectious.

“We’ll smooth the details out soon,” Harvey says, clearing his throat as he catches himself. “For now, I think we should concentrate on stealing Singh’s heart.”

Clay nods. “You’re right.”

“Well, I’m gonna get home, get a good night’s sleep, rest for tomorrow,” Harvey says, pumping his fist into the air and stretching. “Oh, you can keep the menu, by the way.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’ve got an e-copy,” Harvey says. “That’s a thank-you, I guess. And you can come work at my café whenever you’d like.”

“So you only see me as cheap labour?”

“I’ll pay you handsomely, and you can get coffee on the house.”

Clay laughs. “Deal.”

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast turned a vow into a blood oath. Thy bond shall become the wings of rebellion that break the yoke of thy heart. Thou hast awakened to the ultimate secret of the Strength, granting thee infinite power...

[A faint](#) shape hovers behind Harvey, and Clay glances up to find that Milady has now transformed into a Persona more formidable than ever before, a rounded skull dotted with pink. Astarte vanishes into azure dust, with one last nod of acknowledgement to Clay.

“Well, let’s get going,” Harvey says with a wide grin. “Big day for us tomorrow!”

Big day indeed. Tomorrow, they are going to get those last two letters of recommendation and open up the doors to the main hall where the Treasure will be. They will save the city from Singh’s tyranny once and for all.

Chapter End Notes

strength arcana rank 5 -> 10 MAX (tapl) (lol)

Ark of Pride: Infiltration Core

Chapter Summary

the last 2 letters of recommendation!

Chapter Notes

I SWEAR this chap is much better than the previous one the previous chap has got to be my lowest point in the entire fic

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

12/14 – MONDAY – MORNING

George looks up at the sky. It's snowing, as it has been for the past few days. Not enough for school to get cancelled, but enough to stiffen his limbs, to freeze his fingers if not for his warm coat and gloves.

Gina had only come out of her room once or twice recently, and only to join him at the dinner table, asking him how his day's been, whether he'd like to watch movies or do something together. Grief's been as hard on her as it had been on him, but one cannot really tell when their chest cavity's empty.

Darryl didn't come today. He's gotten some kind of eye injury recently – probably got attacked on the way back from school...at least that's what he's been telling people. Maybe he's still recovering.

George settles down in his seat, staring at the desk in front of him. Their homeroom teacher had told the class that Clay has a family emergency back in his hometown, and that he had to leave immediately for an unknown amount of time.

Utter bullshit.

Clay is dead.

There's no changing that fact. Nothing can bring him back.

George rests his head against his palm as he stares out the window, which he catches Clay doing most of the time, watching the snowflakes drift from the sky. He never really paid attention to lessons, getting most questions right because Floris or Darryl just happened to know the answer. God knows how he passed his exams.

And between lessons, he'd pick his bag up, sling it over his shoulder and say a quick goodbye to George, even kissing his hair lightly after they've started dating.

Dating.

What an absurd idea.

Who in the world kills their lover?

His eyes are dry with no hint of tears. He can't bring himself to cry; they just won't come. What the hell is wrong with him?

George is distracted from his thoughts when the teacher walks into the classroom, bringing out her marker and drawing cell organelles on the board. He retrieves his textbook from his bag and flips it open.

*

12/14 – MONDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“Okay, right, we're back at square one,” Dream says. The Thieves are gathered in the safe room right by the restaurant, bent over the table. “We don't know where Shore is.”

“We don't, but because of that, I think I have an idea,” Techno says. “We should ask the restaurant staff about her.”

“After we completely *trashed* their place?” Sapnap looks unconvinced.

Techno shrugs. “I don't think they'll remember. It's been weeks.”

“We could give it a shot,” Skeppy says.

“No harm trying,” Bad agrees.

Dream leads them out of the safe room, headed to the restaurant which happens to be in a much better condition than Dream remembers. The walls are patched up, the cognitive guests are enjoying their food at the tables...the vase with the bluebells is gone, apparently.

What's really surprising is the fact that the restaurant staff are treating them as if nothing has happened, with the same manners and pleasantries they offer the other guests.

“Why're we looking around here again?” TapL asks.

“Because people have to eat eventually, right?” Techno says. “No one's heard hide or hair of this Grace Shore. The staff's got to know something.”

It's pure speculation, but at this point, Techno's intuition is all they've got. Dream leads his team on over to one of the cognitive waiters, who smiles politely.

“How may I help you, good sirs?”

“We'd like to know which room Miss Grace Shore has checked in to,” Techno says. “We've been asked to deliver her food.”

“Really...?” the cognitive waiter looks conflicted. “I cannot release our guests' personal details but...I will phone her and ask.”

Well, crap. They certainly haven't prepared for this.

The waiter rushes to the back and Dream holds his breath. They're going to get found out and will be rushed by Shadows and...

The cognitive waiter returns, but without the expected Shadows in tow. Instead, he bows respectfully.

“Indeed, it appears that you are telling the truth,” the cognitive waiter says. “Miss Shore did mention that she sent someone to deliver the food to her room.”

What a convenient stroke of luck.

Cognitive chefs return with bags of food, enough to feed at least a family. It is Bad and Eret who carries the bags as the waiter gives them directions to Shore’s cabin.

“That’s just one level up from that side deck we were on,” Fundy says, peering at the map once they’re outside.

“Well then,” Eret says, the plastic bags crinkling on his arm. “Let’s go.”

*

“How are we going to get up there?” Dream throws an arm up, shielding his eyes from the strong drafts blustering by.

Oh God, there’s that stench of engine oil again.

He spots her balcony, the room that the waiter mentioned, right above him. They’d probably have to take an elevator to the higher floor, the one with the pool, then they’d have to find her room out of all those cabins...

“Why not just go from the outside?” TapL asks, already hoisting himself up onto the bulwark, standing precariously on the barrier between the deck and the water. If he falls down there, he’s never going to get back up.

“Because grappling hook,” Fundy says, activating the gadget on his paw. The hook shoots out, winding around the rails of the balcony. Fundy goes flying. Dream, Sapnap and Techno are the next to do the same. Skeppy, Bad, Eret and TapL would catch up later since they’ve got food on their hands and are scaling the ship from the sides.

“Oh, her balcony window’s open,” Techno notes. “That’s good.”

Dream waltzes in, realizing that their target, Cognitive Shore, is seated at a table in the corner of her deluxe suite, typing furiously on her computer, accompanied by two maids. She sips from wine glass, looking up only when one of her maids tug on her sleeve.

“Who are you?” Cognitive Shore squints at them, her body tensed. “And what are you doing here?”

A tap of shoes behind Dream alerts him to the others’ arrival. Eret strides forward and places the bags of food on the table.

“Delivery.”

“How rude! Coming through the window like some sort of barbarian!” Cognitive Shore shakes her head disdainfully. “Besides, you weren’t the ones I sent to the restaurant!”

“No, but we have business with you,” Dream says. “We would like a letter of recommendation.”

“A letter of recommendation? Whatever for?” Cognitive Shore stands before them.

“We want to show our support to Mr Singh,” Techno says. “And the only way to do that is to enter the main hall.”

“The main hall, hmm?” Cognitive Shore nods. “How do I know you’re not lying?”

“We’ve already gotten three letters from Mr Singh’s close friends,” Techno continues, motioning at Dream. He holds out the three letters for Cognitive Shore to see. “Shouldn’t that be reason enough to trust us?”

Cognitive Shore seems to consider that. “I suppose.” She turns to one of her maids, who retrieves a piece of paper and a pen.

That was easy. Dream has to praise Techno’s skill at this. She holds up the letter and Dream moves to take it from her.

Only for the letter to fall from her hands as Cognitive Shore transforms, engulfed in black flames before Dream can even blink.

“Fools!” she screeches in an otherworldly voice. “Did you think I really believed that story of yours?”

“Well, we tried,” Techno says, pulling out his light sabre. Dream scoops the letter up from the ground and jams it into his coat pocket.

Her maids transform as well, skin purpling, hair tossed about messily as swords appear in their hands. Shadow Shore herself takes the form of a red-skinned, six-armed woman armed with a sword in each hand. She whips her swords about, growling inhumanly.

“Techno, Eret, TapL, with me. We’re going after the big shot,” Dream says cautiously. “Everyone else, deal with the other two!”

Shadow Shore lashes out, swings of her swords deadly as she coordinates her six arms with ease. Dream leaps back, barely dodging a slash to his chest as he summons Moloch, drawing up a pillar of fire around her. He takes a moment to catch his breath, dismissing Moloch, only for to hear Shadow Shore laughing, the flames vanishing in a cloud of black smoke.

“She nullifies fire,” Eret says. “Be careful!”

Techno sends multiple cyan spheres her way, crashing into walls, neutralizing nearly every single piece of furniture he can touch. Dream takes advantage of the dust and smoke it generates, switching from Moloch to Baphomet, charging his bullets with wisps of blue.

Shadow Shore laughs, sending the bullets right back at him with one swing of her sword. A bullet grazes his cheek, freezing his skin. The other pierce’s TapL’s arm just as the latter looses a grenade shell at her.

“No, don’t-!” Dream shouts, but it’s too late.

Shadow Shore snaps her wrist, her sword’s blade deflecting the grenade back at them. Dream throws an arm up, hardly able to protect himself from the explosion. TapL receives the brunt of the attack, hurled halfway across the room and crashing into Skeppy. They scramble off each other, narrowly evading a stab from one of the Yaksini. Fundy sends a sphere of green at TapL, instantly closing his wound.

“It nullifies fire and repels bullets,” Eret says.

“Does it even have a weakness?” Techno blocks one of Shadow Shore’s blades. Eret fires an arrow of light, severing one of her arms. Shadow Shore screams, her movements getting more erratic. Perhaps...

“TapL! Tetrakarn!”

TapL calls upon Astarte’s power, throwing up gleaming shields just as Shadow Shore strikes, the impact of her stab reflected back upon herself, slicing half her arms clean off.

“H-How?” Shadow Shore bleeds from those stumps, black blood spurting and spilling to the ground, staining the carpet with goo. “How are you-“

Dream summons Baphomet, a spear of ice lancing up right in front of her. Shadow Shore stumbles back and falls to the ground, holding up her two remaining swords with a panicked expression.

[“Please,](#) stop!”

“Well, you attacked us first,” Techno says, the tip of his blade against Shadow Shore’s neck.

“Don’t kill me! I implore you!”

“Oh, we won’t,” Dream says. He holds up his hand, and Techno makes quick work of her other two arms, the limbs dissolving into dust. Shadow Shore whimpers, bowing her head, her Shadow form giving way to her human one. Much better.

“I have a question for you,” Techno says, squatting. “The whole...Medjed thing. Was that you?”

Medjed? Why would...?

“It...It was,” Cognitive Shore sobs. “We were to put the spotlight on the Phantom Thieves by using Medjed’s name.”

“Then you manipulated the polls on the Phan-Site, didn’t you?” Eret says. “You would force us to steal Andre Lee’s heart, and then assassinate him and blame it on us.”

TapL exhales deeply from his nostrils, jaw clenched.

“It-It was Singh’s idea! It was all his idea! I was only following orders-“

“That’s just an excuse and you know it.” TapL strides forward, the muzzle of his gun shoved into her face, his finger on the trigger. To be honest, Dream doesn’t give two shits whether he shoots her or not.

“I’m sorry! I’m so sorry! I can’t lose my job! I need to take care of my father-“

“Let’s leave her alone,” Bad says, walking over and placing a hand on TapL’s shoulder. “This is only her cognitive self. Killing her here won’t change anyt-“

TapL drops his grenade launcher, the gun smashing the ground. He shrugs Bad’s hand off him and reaches for his axe. With one clean swing, he eradicates her. Shadow Shore shrieks and scatters into ash.

Killing her won’t change anything, alright. Dream watches as TapL picks his launcher up and straps it once more to his back. That’s precisely why TapL did what he did.

Sometimes, you’ve just got to let those pent-up emotions run wild.

“You’ve got the letter of recommendation, Dream?” Fundy asks.

“Yeah.” Dream looks through his coat pocket, making sure that all four are there, before heading back down the balcony, dropping onto the side deck with the rest of the Thieves.

*

[“Alright,](#) so the last one left’s the Cleaner.”

The Thieves are once more gathered in the safe room at the side deck, looking over the map of the ship.

“But we have absolutely no idea where they are. We don’t even have a name,” Bad says.

“And we haven’t heard anything about this Cleaner, ever,” Sapnap says. “Is he even on this ship?”

“He has to be.” A strange feeling nags at the back of Dream’s mind. “There wouldn’t be five letters otherwise.”

“Is there anywhere on this ship that we haven’t investigated yet?” Techno asks, eyes scanning the map.

“What’s this?” Fundy gestures to a large room not far from where they are standing, just one floor below.

“Looks like an engine room to me,” Dream says, cocking his head. Is that where that engine oil he’s been smelling comes from? In that case, he knows exactly how to get there...although sanitation would be another issue altogether.

“It’s the only place we have left,” Fundy says. Eret rolls up the map and hands it to Dream. “We can at least check it out.”

The Thieves move out, following Dream’s lead down the side deck and finding a vent emitting the same malodour that Dream remembers. He removes the vent grate and peers into it, finding the vent just big enough for them to fit.

Well, there’s nothing like getting on all fours and crawling through foul-smelling vents like they always do.

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[“If](#) everything goes well, you will become the next President.”

Singh is silent on the other end. He takes a deep breath. “You can’t be sure of that.”

“Be sure of what?” George asks, fingers tightening on his phone.

“I want you to get rid of everyone who knows about this,” Singh says. “Terrace, Yukimura, Shore...no, keep Said. He’s like a little lapdog. He’ll be useful in the future.”

“Why so suddenly? Wouldn’t it be better to wait till after the election and inauguration?” George asks. It wouldn’t be wise to take care of them now, not when Singh is going to win the election...

Not that George is planning to. The moment Singh becomes the next President...that’s when George is going to make him confess all that he has done with his own mouth. Even if justice is long overdue, it would be enough of a victory for himself and Gina, to exact revenge against the

man that killed both their mother and baby brother. There will be no more assassinations. No more psychotic breakdowns and mental shutdowns. No more Phantom Thieves. Everything would be resolved and peace would once again reign over Fariold.

“Wouldn’t you quell my anxiety?” Singh mutters, disappointed. “You do know what will happen if you cross me, don’t you?”

George crushes his phone in his hand. “Yes, sir.” This has never happened before. Singh? Anxious? The guy doesn’t even know the word. What could be the cause?

“Good. Now get to work.”

A dial tone beeps tonelessly in George’s ear. His hand drops to his side, phone clattering to the ground.

It couldn’t be...

*

[“There](#) he is.”

There is a vent opening ahead where light shines through, and the sound of men speaking. Dream hovers over the vent opening, watching as a familiar man speaks to his subordinates with a cigarette in hand. It’s not possible to make out what they are saying from this distance, but from the way his subordinates run off with their tails between their legs, it’s nothing good.

Dream knows that guy. He’s seen him before, back at the pool after they’ve beaten Shadow Yukimura. The guy who told them to stop making a mess of the ship.

Is he the Cleaner?

“Come on,” Dream says, “let’s go.”

He kicks the vent grate, the plate of metal loosening and falling to the ground with a deafening crash. He drops an Ender Pearl through the hole, landing on the ground with nary an injury. He is followed by the rest of the Thieves.

“I thought I heard a noise.”

Dream turns towards the voice to find the man staring at them, cigarette between his lips. He swaggers over, stubbing out his cigarette and reaching for his pack in his pocket, the tattoo of a dragon peeking out from under his sleeve.

[“Are](#) you the Cleaner?” Bad asks.

The man deigns to answer. Instead, he proceeds to light the cigarette and stare them down...or rather, size them up. From his outfit alone, he clearly doesn’t match with the other cognitive guests. If they are royalty, he is a pauper.

After the longest time, he asks, “What do you want from me?”

“We want a letter of recommendation,” Techno says. “To get into Singh’s main hall.”

“You wanna take him down, huh?” the man, the Cleaner, says. “You think you’re a match for him?”

“We can take you down now and prove it,” Sapnap says.

The Cleaner burst into unrestrained laughter. “That proves nothing. Besides, I’m not gonna give up a letter just because you asked for it. I want to make a deal with you.”

“A deal?” Skeppy asks.

“Give me something I want in exchange for the letter, like how the Families do it. How about that?” the Cleaner says, folding his arms. The Families, huh? Does that mean that this guy is...

“What *do* you want?” Eret asks.

“Hmm...” the Cleaner hums, contemplating. “How about a new tattoo? Been meaning to get one for a while now. Any of you an artist?”

[All](#) gazes land on Skeppy.

“What?”

“You an artist, boy?” the Cleaner asks.

“Uh...yeah? But I’ve never drawn a tattoo in my life!”

“There’s a first time for everything,” the Cleaner says. He snaps his fingers and a giant piece of paper and a marker appears in his hands. Skeppy stares, dumbfounded, at the Cleaner, then back at the paper.

“It’s for the letter, Skeppy,” Techno says.

Skeppy sighs, lays the paper on the ground, and gets down to drawing.

He doesn’t take long, though what he’s come up with appears like a rough sketch more than anything. While Dream can’t tell what it is at first glance, he realizes it’s a mythical bird upon closer inspection. A phoenix, probably.

“How’s this?” Skeppy asks, holding up the piece of paper.

Dream glances back at the Cleaner, who’s scrutinizing the artwork. A few, tense seconds pass. The Cleaner opens his mouth to speak, and Dream awaits the inevitable rejecti-

“I like it!” The Cleaner throws his head back and laughs. “That’s it. You’re going to be my personal tattoo artist from now on.”

“Wait, what?” Skeppy’s gaze darts from his drawing to the Cleaner and back again. Something tells Dream that Skeppy drew it terribly on purpose. “No way. No fucking way.”

[That’s](#) not fair. We fulfilled our end of the bargain,” Bad says.

“Do you know who you’re talking to?” The Cleaner barks out a laugh. “*I* decide the deal.”

“No you don’t!” Skeppy cries. “You wanted a tattoo, I drew a tattoo! Now give us the letter and we’ll both leave happy.”

“You don’t understand,” the Cleaner says, and Dream can sense the hostility in his tone amidst his arrogance. “You are in no position to bargain with me.” The black flames licking at his ankles belies his impatience.

Dream sighs, whipping out his dagger. Negotiations have broken down. It's time to speak with violence.

"So that's how it is." The Cleaner cackles, allowing himself to be consumed by the rising column of fire. He emerges a demon, clad in shiny, silver armour and armed with a massive halberd. His voice goes horribly distorted as he swings it around recklessly.

[Dream](#) summons Seiryu, throwing up a Makarakarn just as Shadow Cleaner's Mudoon spell lands, reflecting the needles of darkness back at him, which Shadow Cleaner shrugs off. Dream draws his pistol and cocks it.

Normal bullets aren't able to put a dent in this guy's armour and he's too dangerous to get too close to. Dream's ears are filled with the chattering of Shadows once more, grating in his head. He dispatches TapL, Skeppy, Eret and Sapnap to deal with the converging Shadows while he, Techno, Fundy and Bad will continue with their assault on the big boss.

Techno raises his dagger in time to block the halberd, shoved back by Shadow Cleaner's raw strength. Fundy summons Zorro, sending wind blades straight at the two caught in a deadlock. Shadow Cleaner jumps back, withdrawing his arms. This gives Techno room to hop into Anat and take to the air, raining atomic bombs from above.

Dream summons Seiryu, the sheer might of the Freidyne spheres bouncing off its skin, reflected onto Shadow Cleaner. They fizzle away as soon as they make contact with his armour. Is he immune to everything?

From behind Dream, a barrage of fireballs sails by him, most of them crashing into Shadow Cleaner, but none of them really doing any damage to him or his armour. Shadow Cleaner laughs, swinging his halberd and conjuring up voids of darkness which rush them, swirling with emptiness.

Dream switches out to Lilith, the voids of darkness vanishing as soon as they hit him. However, Bad is not so lucky. He's sent hurtling through the air, straight into Techno, the both of them sprawled out on the ground in a tangle of limbs.

"I think we need to do something about his armour," Fundy says, leaping onto Dream's shoulder. Shadow Cleaner is about to swing his halberd again, preparing those ominous balls of shadows once more. "We can't hit him like this!"

His entire body is encased in silver armour that seems to repel, if not nullify, every single attack they've thrown at him, from bullets to elemental skills...just what can they do...?

Wait a minute.

When Fundy threw out those wind scythes earlier, Shadow Cleaner leapt back, didn't he? If he didn't fear getting hurt, he wouldn't have made any effort to dodge it.

Their enemy may just have an Achilles' heel after all...or an Achilles' *wrist*...

"Fundy! His arms! Go for his arms!"

The same flashes of green whirl at Shadow Cleaner, cutting his attack off as he moves to defend himself. He cuts the wind blades in two and they disappear before they can reach their target. Dream grits his teeth. If they can just get rid of his arms...he won't be able to swing that halberd around anymore.

Dream summons Skadi, stomping the ground, ice cracking around Shadow Cleaner's feet, keeping

him immobile.

“What?” Shadow Cleaner growls.

“Bad! Techno!”

Bad and Techno stand on opposite ends, fireballs and atomic spheres gathered in their palms, ready to fire on command.

“Now!” Dream shouts, and Shadow Cleaner shrieks as he is struck by two beams, neutralizing his demon form completely. All Dream can see, when the two let up, is the Cleaner on the ground, surrounded by piles of ash. He breathes heavily, staggering to his feet.

“What the hell.”

The rest of the Thieves are finishing up on their end too, with Skeppy tearing through the final Shadow with a clean slice of his katana.

Dream walks forth and places a gun against the Cleaner’s forehead.

“Never did I think that I’d find myself with a gun to my head,” the Cleaner says with a chuckle.

“Letter of recommendation,” Dream says, finger tightening on the trigger. “Now.”

“I’m not scared of you, kid,” the Cleaner says. “If you kill me now, you’re never getting your letter of recommendation.”

Well, he’s got a point.

Dream keeps his gun trained on him while the Cleaner sits with his back against the wall. To his surprise, the Cleaner pulls out a piece of paper and pen, scribbling his signature on it and pressing a stamp against the back of the paper which morphs into a wax seal.

“Here,” the Cleaner says, “take it.”

“You’re just giving it to us?” TapL asks, bewildered.

“Yeah.” The Cleaner nods. Techno receives the letter. “I don’t got the energy to deal with Singh anymore, if I’m gonna be honest. I’m tired of cleaning up his shit.” He grins lazily. “Boy, can you point that thing away?”

Dream slips his pistol back into its holster. The Cleaner stands and begins making his way to a door in the back with a sign that says: Authorised Entry Only. He taps a card against the scanner and leaves, the door shutting behind him with a click.

“Where’s his loyalty?” Sapnap mutters. “I thought he’s with Singh.”

“Well, not exactly,” Eret says. “He works for Singh with his ties to the mafia, but politicians don’t really keep such connections close to them.”

Dream nods, checking once again to see if they really do have all five letters on hand. The papers rustle between his fingers as he counts them, noting the wax seal on their backs. One from Said, from Yukimura, from Terrace, from Shore and the final one from the Cleaner.

“Right, now all we’ve got to do is to get to the main hall, slip these pieces of paper in, and boom! We’re done,” Skeppy says.

“Well, we can’t go back the way we came,” Techno says, looking up at the vent opening above them. It’s way too high up, and there aren’t enough Pearls amongst them for everyone to escape that way. Grappling hooks are a no-go either, given that they’d probably just hit their heads on the ceiling.

“Let’s go this way,” Fundy says, already making his way down another path that runs in the direction that the Cleaner’s goons had taken off to earlier. There must be an exit at the end, Dream supposes.

“Alright,” Dream says, stuffing the letters back into his pocket. “Let’s go and settle this once and for all.”

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Chapter End Notes

well...this is infiltration CORE and not FINALE despite getting all 5 letters of recommendation...

Ark of Pride: Infiltration Finale

Chapter Summary

the battle.

Chapter Notes

well this is the chapter that ur all waiting for...

I HOPE I DID THIS WELL

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

12/14 – MONDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“I found you. Finally.”

Dream halts in his tracks. He stares, wide-eyed, at the man standing in front of him, dressed in a familiar blue shirt, the numbers “404” splashed across the front. However, his mask, instead of a blinding white, is now a murky black, lenses crimson.

His posture is almost relaxed, if not for the obvious tension in the air.

“George!”

“It’s not ‘George’ in the Metaverse, Dream,” George says, walking towards them, several things on him that Dream has never seen before, including a pistol in a holster and a pair of chakrams hanging from his belt. “But then again, I’m not your Navi anymore.”

“You...how’d you know? About me...”

“I don’t know. Gut feel, probably,” George says, shrugging. “Dream, I don’t know how you got out of that interrogation room, but the fact remains that you did.”

“I...” Dream’s throat dries. “George, why are you doing this? You don’t have to live under Singh’s thumb anymore!”

“You don’t understand at all.” George’s voice is shaky. Behind him, a dark shape looms. It’s not Necronomicon – Dream would have recognized its shape instantly. It’s another Persona altogether. How can he have two Personas at the same time?

“Wait, you have more than one Persona!” Fundy realizes.

“I thought only Dream could do that!” Sapnap cries.

“You don’t understand at all, Clay!” George shouts. “You don’t understand a fucking thing!”

The shape grows even clearer. It takes the form of a giant sphere, grinning terrifyingly at them, striped in black and white. It disappears just then, replaced with Necronomicon.

“I can’t *not* kill you! I can’t put...I can’t put her life over yours!”

Her...? By her, he means...

“I have to kill you here,” George says, shaking his head. “I can’t risk *him* finding out you’re still alive!”

“But you can join us again!” Eret says.

“You can take Singh down with us,” Fundy cries. “Together, we can change Singh’s heart.”

At that, George laughs. A painful, hollow laugh. “Change Singh’s heart? I don’t want to do that. No, he deserves a lot more than that.”

“A lot more than...that? What are you...?” Dream reels, throwing up an arm to shield his eyes from the blinding green light pouring from Necronomicon’s body. Its tentacles wrap around George’s limbs as he’s lifted into its shell.

“For my plan to succeed and for Gina to live, you all have to die here,” George says, voice calm. “Right here, right now.”

[Necronomicon](#) hovers even higher into the air. A beam of viridian light is cast upon the ground, Shadows materializing into existence. It appears that George isn’t going to fight them himself first. Moreover, as long as he remains in Necronomicon, he’s impervious to all damage.

They’re going to have to defeat the Shadows first and deal with George later.

“Come to me.” George echoes in their heads. “Loki.”

The same, rounded Persona that Dream had seen earlier appears behind him again. Its shriek pierces Dream’s eardrums. He winces, squinting. The Shadows before them, Cerberus and Cu Chulainn are now dyed a pitch black, golden eyes glowing amidst the darkness.

“Careful!” Fundy shouts. “These aren’t ordinary Shadows!”

Dream readies his dagger, ready to summon his Personas at a moment’s notice.

The Shadows strike. They are faster than Dream remembers. He summons Skadi, able to fend off Cerberus with a single blade of ice to its throat. Cerberus tumbles back, unfazed, launching itself at Dream again, baring fangs and claws.

Cerberus is made short work of by Skeppy, katana laced with shards of ice. Cold sweeps through the room. Dream shivers as the temperature plummets.

Cu Chulainn comes for Dream’s head next, waving that spear of his around like a raging madman, no longer possessing his usual precision. Sapnap and Techno circumvents his increased strength easily – a quick smash to its head with Sapnap’s cudgel and a burst of light from Techno’s ray gun does the trick beautifully.

When both Shadows have been eradicated, Necronomicon dissolves and George lands with a light tap. Instead, Loki takes its place, emanating the vilest aura that Dream has ever felt in his life. This thing is trouble, and Dream knows it.

“He’s got two Personas,” Techno says, eyes never leaving George. “One for his hatred.”

“And the other for love,” Dream utters. Borne from his love for Gina, back in her Palace.

George draws his chakrams, the razor edge of the blade glinting in the dim light of the engine room. His face is utterly devoid of emotion, as if he has abandoned them ages ago. Dream bites his lip.

Was it all a lie?

The first chakram goes flying, burning with black flames, moving with such insane speeds that Dream can hardly evade it. The spinning blade misses him by a hair’s breadth, circling back and slicing deeply into Sapnap’s arm. Sapnap drops his cudgel, clutching at the wound as blood spurts from it.

The second chakram soars too close for comfort, the sizzle of the black flames deafening in Dream’s ears as the weapon zips by him.

George raises a hand, catching his chakrams. As if on cue, more and more Shadows begin to appear, black goo dripping from their bodies as they rise into their demonic forms.

“TapL, Eret, Fundy, Bad! Focus on the Shadows!” Dream orders. “Skeppy, Sapnap, Techno—

George spins on his heels and meets TapL’s axe just in time, the clang of metal resonating in the room.

“TapL? What the hell are you doing?” Eret calls.

“Sorry Dream,” TapL says as he leaps away, axe blade screeching along the metal floor. “This is my fight too.”

Dream narrows his eyes. “Skeppy, go with Bad!”

With TapL so emotional right now, it’s unlikely he’s going to listen to reason. Dream raises his dagger, blocking one of George’s chakrams. George throws out a hand and the chakrams return magically to him.

Then, George rushes him.

He moves frighteningly fast.

Chakrams clutched in his hands, he comes at Dream, slash after slice after slash. Dream can’t bring himself to look at George’s face. No anger, no sorrow. Just pure emptiness. Dream doesn’t want to fight him. He wants to drop his weapon and sweep George up into a hug because God knows he needs one. Or a thousand.

George manages to nick Dream’s cheek. Pain pricks at him, but it doesn’t bother Dream in the slightest. Not when the pain that George must have gone through was so much worse than that - an agony so intense that it’s ripped his heart out and shredded it, leaving him as hollow as he is now.

Dream summons Skadi again, throwing up a wall of ice that George easily shatters. Dream shuts his eyes, bracing himself for George’s chakram to grace his face.

The impact never arrives.

When he opens his eyes, he finds TapL having summoned Astarte, guns blazing. The bullets,

charged with a pinkish aura, home in on George, the latter raising his chakrams and deflecting a few. The bullets ricochet off the ceiling and walls, slamming into the ground, tiny explosions ringing out throughout the room.

“Don’t you *dare* hurt him!” Dream roars.

He launches himself at TapL as soon as TapL’s grenade launcher catches the gleam of the light. The both of them tumble to the ground, the launcher aimed upwards. An orange shield is erected over them, protecting them from the shrapnel and debris.

Dream scrambles off TapL, glancing around, breaths heavy. The other Thieves were far from the blast, focused on dealing with the increasing number of Shadows infected by Loki. But where’s George? Where is-

Dream throws his head back on instinct, a chakram flying out of nowhere, grazing the bridge of his nose, black flames trailing behind it. Loki’s unsettling grin stares him down. George thrusts a piece of debris off him, the chunk of metal hitting the ground with a thunk.

“Why?” George sounds more broken than angry. Dream wants to thank the heavens above. Thank them for that one trickle of emotion, no matter what it was; it’s loads better than George being merely a husk of a person. “Why can’t you just die?”

“I don’t want to do this either, George,” Dream cries, dismissing his Persona. “Please. Can’t we go back to how we were before?”

“How we were?” George shakes his head, voice tortured. “We were never anything, Dream.”

Dream is stunned. It’s as if George took a knife, stabbed it through Dream’s heart and twisted it for good measure.

“Look out!”

Techno grabs Dream’s wrist and pulls him aside. Dream can’t even feel the gash as the chakram slices his thigh. He grits his teeth. Was George lying the whole time? Did he only play pretend to lower Dream’s guard? Was he-

“Can you stop spacing out in the middle of battle?” Techno hisses. Dream’s never heard him so frustrated before.

We were never anything.

Dream blocks George’s second chakram, grimacing as the black flames blaze against his fingers for a split second.

“If you loved me, Dream, you’d die for me,” George says, and the lenses of his mask flashes sinisterly. Loki flickers behind him, twirling like an oversized sun.

Is it just Dream or is it...is Loki fading...?

No, it’s back at full strength. Necronomicon is gone, replaced by Loki’s menacing presence, flaring behind George as George screams, black flames swirling around his feet, growing and growing like a whirlpool. The power emitted is so great that Dream has to plant his heels into the floor to keep himself from being blown away.

What emerges from the vortex of flames is George, his mask now having swollen to cover most of

his face save for his nose and mouth, his costume now having morphed into a black bodysuit, cuffs and hems flared. A golden-chain belt wraps around his waist, his pistol's holster plastered tightly to his body.

TapL rushes in for an attack, summoning Milady and casting another wave of homing bullets at George. George ducks, the bullets soaring past his head and making a U-turn.

"You killed my father, George!" TapL bellows, psychic power flowing from the tips of his fingers to the blade of his axe.

"TapL! Stop it!" Eret shouts.

Loki blocks the bullets, the homing missiles crashing against the barrier it has put up. George drops to the ground and TapL's axe misses him. It all happens in the blink of an eye. With one swift punch, chakram in hand, George sends TapL flying through the air, blood spurting from his stomach.

A droplet of perspiration trickles down Dream's chin. TapL crashes to the ground, eyes wide in shock. Fundy is by his side in seconds, emerald light sparkling from his paws. How can George just...mercilessly...?

Dream ducks as a chakram sails above his head, singing his hair, the blade whizzing back at him as the black flames grow stronger. He raises his dagger and blocks George's next attack, summoning Skadi.

Ice freezes the ground around him, spreading from the soles of his feet to George's, but the latter notices and moves too quickly, hopping back, giving Dream time to dodge the returning chakram.

George grips his chakrams, bent over, wheezing. Something's not quite right. Dream tenses, afraid that with one mistake, it'll be all over for him. For him and his friends.

["Why...?"](#) George drops his gaze to the ground. "Why me?" His chakrams fall from his hands with a loud clang, the lingering black flames dissipating.

Dream has no words. George was just unlucky, born into the wrong circumstances. It was either Gina's life, or the life of other people that Singh wanted dead. To George, it was no choice at all.

"How are you different from me?" George demands. "How can someone like you be better than me?"

Dream drops his dagger and runs over, catching George just as George's legs give way. George's body is overheating, burning against Dream as he wraps his arms around George, unwilling to let go. George lies limply in his grasp, the last of the malicious aura around him fading away, his mask returning back to how it had been at the start – the black headgear shrinking to form goggles.

The Shadows around them are disappearing as well, the last of them settled by the other Thieves.

"George, are you okay?" Dream asks, brows furrowed.

George doesn't respond, slumped against Dream. He takes a deep breath.

"Dream, be careful," Sapnap says. "He could still try and kill you."

Dream is distinctly aware of that possibility, but deep down, he knows that George wouldn't do it. It's not just wishful thinking; George is spent from having to use up that final power of his, to give

himself unrivalled strength at a tremendous cost of his energy. He can't do much in this state.

"Come back with us," Dream pleads. He lowers the both of them to the ground, grip still tight around him. "We can steal his heart. Then we'll make him confess everything and he'll pay for what he does."

George laughs tiredly. "But if...if I..." His voice cracks. "If he even *suspects* that I've let you live..."

"We'll send the calling card soon. Tomorrow, maybe. Then we'll beat his ass and he'll confess to all his crimes and we'll save Fariold. Hell, we'll save the entire country. We'll save Gina too."

When George lifts his head, Dream's heart shatters. Tracks of red run down his cheeks from underneath those goggles, drying on his skin. Dream cups his face, brushing away his tears. His fingers touch the edge of his mask.

"Can I?"

George makes an affirmative noise, and Dream carefully slides it so that it rests on his forehead. George's eyes are closed, even as Dream presses a kiss to his nose.

"So, what do you say?"

George presses his lips together. He stares up at Dream, as if searching for an answer to a silent question.

"I...I think--"

A sharp bang has Dream snapping his head up, eyes widening.

"Oh, this is so touching."

Dream recognizes that voice. A voice that's all too familiar. As bizarre as it may seem, another George walks towards them, this one dressed in his every day Enderlands uniform, a pistol in hand, aimed at Dream.

"Who is that?" Eret steels himself.

Dream clutches George tighter to him.

"That's Singh's cognitive version of George," Fundy says. "That must be how he sees..."

"That's how he sees his son," Techno says. "As he does anyone else. Nothing more than a tool."

Cognitive George keeps his pistol trained on Dream, a twisted grin creeping up his lips.

"You know what would happen if you defied our father now, don't you?" Cognitive George says with a lilt in his voice. "You know who will die."

George stiffens.

"Not if we steal Singh's heart before he can make it happen," Techno says, stepping forward, reaching for his gun.

"You don't want to do that," Cognitive George says, cocking the gun. "Not if you value your leader's life."

Techno's hand falls to his side, annoyance evident on his features.

Cognitive George turns to the real one. "I'm offering you an ultimatum here. Kill this man now, and Gina remains safe...or you could die now, and I'll kill the rest of your friends."

George bites his lip, contemplative, but only for a split second.

Dream doesn't even know when he's regained his strength, because George pushes him away with a grunt, catching him off guard. Dream hits the floor, only to find George standing a fair distance from him, mask now having slid back over his eyes, beside the Cognitive George.

His pistol is aimed at Dream, right between his eyes. With one pull of the trigger, he can put a bullet in his skull. He can end Dream's life right here and right now.

We were never anything.

What is stopping George anyway?

"George!" Sapnap shouts.

Cognitive George watches on with the biggest shit-eating grin on his face. How? How can Singh only see his own *son* as a stepping stone? A tool to get what he wants?

"This is..." George's voice is caught in his throat. Dream's heart leaps to his mouth. "This is goodbye, Dream."

"Wait, Geo-" Dream screams, only to realize, shell-shocked, when George whirls around and shoots Cognitive George in the chest, before grabbing his chakram off the ground and hurling it into the air.

It zips past them faster than the eye can see, slamming into a red button. The engine room begins to rumble and beep, crimson lights flashing worryingly. Dream's head snaps back to see a partition rising between himself and George.

["No!"](#) Dream sprints, but the partition is too fast.

All he can see before George disappears from view is a sorrowful smile.

"Take care of Gina for me."

The partition crashes against the ceiling with a bang.

"No! Please no!" Dream slams his fists against the partition. There's got to be some way to break it. There has to be! Dream summons Moloch, hurling fireballs at it, attempting to roast the partition from the ground up. When that doesn't work, he summons Baphomet, but even its spheres of darkness are useless against it.

"Dream, stop," Techno says, a hand on his shoulder.

Dream's vision swims as he jerks away from him. "He's not dead! George! Please answer me--"

Two gunshots ring out through the room, startling the Thieves. Dream goes rigid. The worst possible outcome flashes through his mind. His mouth dries, stomach sinking to the pit of his gut.

"I've lost..." Eret swallows thickly. "I've lost their signals."

Lost their signals?

“Don’t lie to me, Eret,” Dream says, striding over and grabs Eret’s collar, the fabric bunching in his fist. “He’s not dead. We have to get this *thing* open and we’re going to get George back and-“

“Dream...” Bad whispers.

“Don’t ‘Dream’ me!” Dream snarls, turning on Bad. He ignores the fear flashing in Bad’s eyes, stabbing a finger at the partition. “You burn this down right now and-“

“Dream!” Skeppy steps between him and Bad. “Don’t you dare.”

Dream grits his teeth, the first tear rolling down his cheek. “If you’re not...” He wavers. “If you’re not going to help me, I’m going to break this fucking door down myself.”

Dream can sense them. The Shadows gathering in this one room. Not that it matters, though. Eret shouts something, something urgent, it seems, but Dream doesn’t hear it.

Why had George done that? To save his life?

“Dream! Come on! We have to leave!”

He could have just killed Dream right there and then, and then Gina would still be alive, and *George* would still be alive...

Dream’s fist, knuckles bruised and bloodied, is about to connect with the wall again, only to be stopped by Sapnap. He grabs Dream’s wrist and pulls him away from the wall.

The wall that separates him and George.

“No! Stop! Leave me the fuck alone!” The floodgates are open. Everything blurs before him. Every sound rings in his ears. He can hardly feel pain even as he trips and falls, taking Sapnap with him. With Skeppy and Techno’s help, he stumbles up the stairs, angling his neck, straining to catch even a single glimpse of George...

[What](#) happens after is merely a haze in his mind. When he comes to, Dream finds himself sitting on a couch, staring into nothing. His eyes are puffy, his nose clogged, throat parched. Gentle fingers pry his mask off his face, laying it on the table, and a handkerchief enters his line of view.

He isn’t sure who’s dabbing at his face, ridding him of the rivulets of tears. Someone else hands him a water bottle, but Dream isn’t in the mood for water right now. He shrugs his coat off at someone else’s prompting, the coat pooling around him on the couch.

The painful reality glares back at him.

George is gone.

Gone for good.

The thought taunts Dream. Mocks him for not doing better. If only Dream reached out to him earlier...If only Dream been stronger...strong enough to protect himself, then George wouldn’t have to do what he did...if only...

Dream doesn’t know how long he’s been in his trance when someone hoists him to his feet. Dream’s legs are weak. Weak like jelly, about to collapse at any moment. He leans heavily on whoever’s helping him, staggering down the hallway. The hallway littered with Shadows that

seem to avoid them like the plague.

The main hall comes into view, its shiny, golden doors blinding. Techno and Eret slips the letters through the slits in the walls and the double doors open up, revealing another golden chamber beyond it.

There is a tall platform at the other end, a stage with a podium where Shadow Singh probably gives speeches. Lining the carpet leading to the stage are many rows of long desks and benches, where, perhaps, those qualified to come in here would sit and show their support for Singh.

The mere mention of his name has Dream's blood boiling. He'd take down Singh, even if it's the last thing he'd do.

"I think we should...we should go back and rest for today," Eret says. "We'll talk about the calling card another time."

The Thieves nod, agreements quiet, atmosphere heavy. Dream's arm is tossed around Sapnap's shoulders as he hobbles out to the main, front deck with the rest of the Thieves. Techno pulls out his phone and the world pulses around them.

"Returning to the real world. Thank you for your hard work."

Chapter End Notes

i know chakrams arent supposed to come back to u but george's returns to him through loki's magic

We Will Take This Country

Chapter Summary

it is what it is

Chapter Notes

DISCLAIMER: i am in NO way, shape or form promoting how dream copes with grief in this chapter. it's just what i think he, as a character in this fic, would do in this kind of situation.

um this is more of a...a chill chap?

no music in the first part

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

12/14 – MONDAY – EVENING

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12/15 – TUESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

...

...

...

“Hey.”

...

...

“Dinner’s downstairs.”

...

“Mom and Dad are worried.”

...

“You have to eat something.”

...

...

...

“I’ll bring it up for you later.”

*

12/15 – TUESDAY – EVENING

...

...

“Clay?”

...

“Darryl, Zak and Eret are here to see you.”

...

“If you don’t want to see them, then...I can...uh...ask them to come back another time.”

Clay peels himself off the bed, sunken eyes staring at the wall emotionlessly. Floris is curled up by his side, fur tickling his skin.

But Clay can’t be bothered to care.

“Sorry. I’m not feeling it today.” His voice is hoarse, throat scratchy.

“Darryl brought muffins. I can bring one up for you.”

Clay can’t even find the energy in himself to force a smile. He nods and thanks Nick, who heads back out of the room. Floris remains with Clay as the latter lays back down against his bed. He doesn’t want to sleep, even though he hasn’t slept well the previous night.

Whenever he closes his eyes, he can see *him*. He can see *him* with his arms outstretched, surrounded by black, blazing fire. He can see the bloody tear tracks on his cheeks, ending at his goggles, calling his name. It’s only when he blinks, opens his eyes again that that image

disappears, and he's granted the respite of hollowness again.

"Do you want to go out for a walk tomorrow?" Floris asks. "Like, in the morning or something?"

Clay mumbles, "I'll consider it."

Floris makes a noise of acknowledgement.

What's the point of stealing Singh's heart anymore? Why can't the world suffer like George did? Why should they save everyone else from the same fate?

He isn't supposed to think this way. He knows that. He isn't supposed to wish pain upon anyone, but...why can't he stop these...these plaguing thoughts? Maybe he should let Nick and Floris drag him out of bed tomorrow...the indoors is looking rather bleak right now.

Clay turns onto his side, burrowing even deeper into his duvet and stares at the wall.

For now, he's in no mood to even move.

*

12/16 – WEDNESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

It's cold.

It's cold.

It's cold.

...

...

...

Cold.

Clay looks up at the sky, at the snowflakes falling from the sky. With one sweatshirt and a pair of tight-fitting jeans, he may or may not have underdressed, but the chill distracts him from his thoughts anyway.

He's freer this way, without Nick and Floris hovering over him every second. He stands by the lake at Helen Park, staring out at the boats in the water even on this snowy day.

He remembers the last time he spent alone with George before the whole...the whole fiasco. They had gotten in a boat together and rowed out where the water glittered under the moonlight. It was there that they shared a kiss for the final time before the day of reckoning, before they carried out the heist on Shadow Armstrong's casino.

Clay's phone buzzes then and he picks it up, staring down at the sender's name.

Gina.

Now he feels awful, like the worst human being on the planet. He hadn't checked up on her after they had returned from Singh's Palace on Monday. He'd been so selfish, only thinking about his own sorrow, never once considering that Gina, George's sister, could be experiencing grief even

more intense than his own.

What kind of a friend is he?

Gina: Hey

Gina: can we talk?

Gina: I heard you haven't been feeling well these past few days

Gina: I'm free tonight

Gina: if you are

Clay wipes at his eyes – when did those tears get there? – and responds to her messages. His fingers are frozen stiff, numb as he punches in the letters one by one, barely coming up with a coherent message.

Me: sure

Gina's reply is immediate.

Gina: okay

Gina: meet me at our house

Our house...

Clay shoves his phone back into his pocket and heads for the train station, deciding to spare his extremities before he develops some form of frostbite.

The station is packed with people, mostly businesspeople, heading home from work. Clay glares at his feet as he jostles past them, making his way down to the platform. These are the people voting for Singh. Voting for someone so wicked, someone so self-centred.

Are they just going along with the crowd? Swayed by others' opinions?

Whatever it is, Clay will have no pity for the ignorant public if Singh gets elected. They would have brought this upon themselves. It is their fault that-

The draft from the train's arrival forces Clay to wrap his arms around himself, conserving whatever little body heat he has left.

He'd head on over to Gina's residence in the evening. For now, he's got to get himself warmed up and prepared.

*

12/16 – WEDNESDAY – EVENING

Clay reaches for the key underneath the doormat and unlocks the door with it. The living room is dark, as if no one has been here in a long time. Clay shuts the door behind him with a click.

He heads up the staircase to that narrow corridor, walking over to Gina's room. He raps his knuckles on the door, waiting for a response.

He can't be sad. Not when it is Gina who just lost her final, living relative who cared about her.

"Come in."

Clay does not fail to notice that her voice is significantly less cheerful than it was a couple of months ago. Slowly, he edges the door open, to find Gina already facing him, her lips quirked up into a sad smile. Unfortunately, Clay cannot find it in himself to reciprocate.

"Have a seat." Gina gestures to her bed, and Clay takes the invitation. "Sorry, there're no...no cream teas or anything today."

Clay ignores the sudden stabbing pain in his chest. "I suppose."

They don't speak for the longest time, staring at the ground. A police siren blares outside, and Gina stiffens. She turns back to her computer and begins typing.

"I know how to take Singh down," Gina says. "I've got an idea for the calling card."

"The calling card..." Clay mumbles. That's right. He's almost forgotten about that.

"Yeah," Gina says quietly. "So, we can do this thing where--"

"Who cares about the calling card?"

Gina turns to him, her eyes wide. "What do you mean? Don't you want to get revenge on Singh?" She gulps.

Clay doesn't dare to meet her eyes. "Sure, it was Singh who ultimately forced him to do what he did but it's the public who gave him power. The public who is going to vote him for President."

"That's exactly why we have to steal his heart," Gina says. "If we steal his heart, he will confess and people can see how bad he really is."

"Why not let the public suffer?"

Gina furrows her brows. "What do you mean?"

"The public are the ones who can't open their eyes. They are the ones who go along with everyone else. They don't have a mind of their own."

"Are you serious?" Gina props her elbow onto the table, resting her head on her hand. "I can't believe you."

"What's so hard to believe about that?" Irritation scratches at Clay, crawling under his skin like maggots. Why can't she see it from his point of view? "They brought this upon themselves. They should have to suffer for--"

"Look at me." Gina claps her hands on Clay's shoulders. Clay meets her gaze. Her determined gaze. "Why did you continue on as a Phantom Thief until now? What was your goal as a Phantom Thief?"

"My goal?"

"Yeah."

Clay looks down at his fingers, fiddling with the hem of his shirt. "I..."

Gina waits; she doesn't give him an answer. Clay clenches and unclenches his fists.

"I wanted...to help people. Help people who couldn't help themselves."

["See?"](#)

Clay peers up at Gina's face, her eyes shining.

"Wouldn't leaving the public to their fate be going against your goal? What if they're victims of terrible influences?" Gina asks. "Besides, George wouldn't have wanted you to wallow over here in self-pity and hate, right?"

"He wanted revenge against Singh." Clay can only imagine what he'd have done to Singh's Shadow.

"Well, think of this as a form of revenge. You're avenging George," Gina says, "by taking Singh down."

For the first time since he's emerged from that engine room, he smiles. Genuinely. It *would* be what George wanted, wouldn't it? To see Singh fall before his very eyes.

If George can't do that now, then Clay will just have to do it for him in his place.

"You got me there." Clay says, pointing at Gina's computer. "Alright, what do you have for me?"

Gina whirls back to her computer, a wide grin on her face. "Okay, you're gonna love this."

While he had been, as Gina put it, wallowing in self-pity, she's been working on this herself. It must have taken ages and a lot of skill, but to take down a politician with that kind of power, it may just be what they need...

"We'll carry this plan out tomorrow," Clay says. "Can we...can this place be our hideout again?"

Gina grins. "Anytime."

With renewed spirits, Clay leaves the residence, promising to take Gina out for breakfast tomorrow. He reaches for his phone and proceeds to message the Thieves.

*

[12/17 – THURSDAY – EVENING](#)

"The results of the election would be announced tomorrow, although it seems like the most likely candidate--"

People gasp as the big screen flashes, the news anchor disappearing, replaced by the logo of the Phantom Thieves and a shrill cackle. The very same logo splashes across television and phone screens countrywide, the laughter booming through the radios.

"Citizens of Fariold! Listen up!"

The police station is a buzz of activity with the beep of computers and the frenzied shout of officers.

"You have been deceived! The truth has been hidden from your eyes by one sinful man, and one man alone!"

“Is that the Phantom Thieves?” One of the officers stares at the spinning top hat and mask that has appeared on every single screen in the station, taunting them rudely.

“I don’t know! Isn’t their leader supposed to be dead?” His superior peers over his shoulder, eyes narrowed.

The person behind the microphone continues to speak, their voice distorted by a voice changer.

“Who is this one man, you ask? He is one tainted with his untameable pride. All he wants is power. He doesn’t care about this country; all he cares about is himself! I bet you’re all dying to know who he is!” A dramatic pause. “Well, his name is-“

Suddenly, the screens turn black. A man waves a fist. “Hey! It was getting to the good part!”

In a matter of seconds, the screens flash back on, this time with Singh’s face plastered all over them.

“His name is Markus Singh! Your beloved President-to-be!” the voice cries. Shrieks ring out through the city. “He is a malicious sinner of pride who will stop at nothing, even using people as stepping stones to achieve his goal. Mark our words! We, the Phantom Thieves, will take his heart and save the country from his tyranny!”

There is another dramatic pause, and the voice continues, “Oh? You don’t think we’re legit? Well, think again! The people investigating us would know whether all of us are here or not!”

Singh’s face is now replaced with that of eight silhouettes – eight human silhouettes and a canine one – each holding a different weapon. The lighting is such that none of their faces can be seen, but there are, very clearly, eight Thieves present.

“Wasn’t their leader dead?”

“What do they mean? Singh is-!”

It’s as if the city has come to a standstill. Thousands, if not millions, of pairs of eyes are fixed on the screens, waiting for the mysterious voice’s next words.

“Quick! Check the morgue!” an officer shouts. Several other officers scramble to the basement, where the headquarters’ morgue is located. “There must have been a mistake!”

“And now,” the voice continues, “allow our leader to say a few words!”

The figure in the centre walks towards the camera, keeping his face angled in such a way that it remains hidden in the darkness.

“If we let Singh continue with his warped ways, he will bring ruin upon this land. Before that happens, we will take this country!”

At that, the public cheers. Hands raised in the air, screaming and screeching at the declaration. The excitement is mounting. With that, the screen fades to black.

Singh grips his phone with a hiss, slamming it onto the table.

“That damned brat! Can’t even do one thing right!” Singh roars. His secretary tenses in fear, clutching her clipboard to her chest. He stabs a finger at her. “Get Aidan. Now!”

The secretary runs off, disappearing out the room as swiftly as her legs can take her.

If those...those *rats* are going to wage an all-out war on him, he will respond in turn.

With the power of cognitive psience.

Chapter End Notes

bad, skeppy and eret are the ones checking up on gina on the first few days that dream is...well...mourning

Ark of Pride: Life Will Change

Chapter Summary

here it is!

Chapter Notes

the shadow singh fight yall have been waiting for...i hope this lives up to u guys' expectations...

im not sure whether i'll be able to post tomorrow because i'm going out with my friend for one whole day...just putting that out there first

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

12/17 – THURSDAY – EVENING

“Glad to have you back, leader,” Fundy says with a smile.

Dream returns it, his hands in his pockets. They now stand on the main deck of Singh’s cruise ship, the high security levels from within the ship permeating the air.

“We only have one chance at this,” Dream says, turning to his team. “Let’s do this.”

They run into the hall, guns blazing, taking out each and every one of the incoming Shadows. They race up the staircase that takes them to the main hall. To Dream’s relief, the doors remain open.

As soon as they step into the main hall, the doors slam shut behind them with a resounding bang. The Thieves find themselves surrounded by cognitive beings seated on the benches, papers filled with unintelligible writing spread out over the desks. Dream tenses, watching as someone strides onto the podium, dressed in a general’s outfit, a flashy helmet sitting atop his head. His golden eyes are piercing, as if staring straight into Dream’s soul.

“The Phantom Thieves!” Shadow Singh announces. “I see your insolence knows no bounds. How dare you challenge me upon this grand day?”

“It’s *because* the election’s tomorrow. That’s why we’re challenging you now,” Dream says resolutely. “Now, hand over the Treasure!”

Said Treasure glows above the podium, taking the form of the steering wheel of a ship. Shadow Singh laughs and the Treasure blinks out of existence with a flick of his wrist. Dream never did think it would be that easy.

“Friends! Countrymen! I am inclined to believe that the Phantom Thieves are threatening the very security of this country, our very lives. Do you agree with me?”

Dream nearly jumps as the cognitive beings around them rises and gives Shadow Singh a standing

ovation, claps ringing out throughout the room. It's no surprise that he's got all these people's support – they fear him after all. Fear him for his power that they'd do anything to remain on his good side.

“Hmm?” Recognition flickers across his face as he peers down at Dream. “You look somewhat... familiar.”

Dream removes his mask, and Singh laughs.

“Ah, it's that runt from that one time,” Singh says in a mocking tone. “The one who dared cross me.”

“So you *do* remember him,” Sapnap says, drawing his cudgel.

“By chance,” Singh says. “I don't usually bother memorising the faces of peasants.” He holds up a hand, and the cognitive beings fall away, vanishing into nothing. Dream drops his stance as the room begins to change, the benches and desks disappearing. The floor's tiles now shine with a golden gleam, as distastefully as the rest of the room.

[A golden](#) lion appears in the sky with Shadow Singh perched on it, its wingbeats almost powerful enough to send the Thieves flying into the air. The lion is disgusting – its fantastical form made up completely of golden human bodies clamouring for him...Shadow Singh, that is. Plopping to the ground from the lion's stomach are Shadows, Shadows that burst into their demonic forms.

“TapL, Fundy, Techno, with me. Everyone else deal with the Shadows!”

The Thieves break out into their respective formations. The moment they do, Shadow Singh strikes.

He's clearly aiming for Dream, what with the balls of fire and arrows of ice, the bolts of lightning and the raging tornadoes. Dream can't even catch a break. If he's not swerving to dodge the barrage of icicles he's ducking to avoid a severe burn.

“Zorro!” Fundy whips up twin cyclones, sending them Shadow Singh's way, only for the agile lion to soar higher, avoiding even the cyan spheres that Techno fires.

“Use your guns!” Dream draws his pistol, summoning Baphomet, bullets charged with crackling electricity. Unfortunately, the bullets miss, crashing into the wall, landing uselessly onto the ground. They need another sort of bullet...something more...

TapL summons Astarte, a pink tail behind the bullets as they chase after the lion, moving at lightning speeds. Not even Shadow Singh's lion can dodge the bullet hail which ram into the golden bodies, chipping them off bit by bit, opening the lion's core for them to attack.

The core's gleams pierce the holes in the lion's coat, appearing to be in the shape of a pyramid.

“Dream!” TapL runs up to him, narrowly avoiding a blue bolt. “I'm going to direct all bullets at him. Give it all you've got!”

Indeed, they'll need some kind of psychic power to pull these homing bullets off. Dream gives the order to Techno and Fundy, and the three of them begin to fire, their bullets cloaked in a pink aura. With TapL's help, the bullets curve and weave, hot on the majestic lion's tail while Dream and the others move to avoid the rain of fireballs.

True to TapL's word, the bullets meet their mark, cruising past the chips in his armour, smashing

the core that lies within the lion. The lion falls apart, roaring in pure agony as it crashes to the ground. Dream winces as despairing shrieks pierce his eardrums, the beast bursting into a cloud of ash. Shadow Singh glares at the pile on the ground, arms folded.

“Useless plebians,” Shadow Singh says. “It was foolish of me to believe that *peasants* can even be remotely useful.”

Dream’s blood boils. Did he think the same of...of George too?

“Give it up,” Techno says, gun trained on Shadow Singh’s forehead. “You are nothing without the people who support you.”

At that, Shadow Singh bellows with laughter. Dream doesn’t like the sound of that.

“What makes you think you have power over me, son?” Shadow Singh says. Techno’s finger tightens on the trigger. “You were the useless one, between yourself and that George boy.”

“I’d rather not be useful to you,” Techno mutters. “Now give us the Treasure.”

A smirk spreads across Shadow Singh’s face.

“Get back!” Fundy shouts and the team obeys, just in time to avoid a pillar of energy that springs around Shadow Singh. Dream sees faces, the faces of the people that this man has executed in order to get what he wanted, their mouths open in silent screams. Andre Lee, Principal Patterson...

George.

Shadow Singh absorbs this power, his muscles growing to the point of bulging, tearing through his dress shirt and jacket, revealing a set of muscle braces resembling that of chains and springs, all the while with black flames wreathing his limbs.

“Those muscles aren’t just for show,” Fundy warns.

Dream swaps his Persona out to Seiryu right when Shadow Singh makes his move. However, nothing could have prepared him for Shadow Singh’s sudden relentless assault. His footwork is light, giving him the speed he needs to slam a fist into Dream’s face. Dream’s nose cracks and he’s sent flying halfway across the room, landing in the path of another attacking Shadow.

“Watch out!”

An arrow of light pierces the Shadow’s head, black blood spurting from the wound and saving Dream from the Shadow’s claws. Green curls around him, mending his nose and broken cheekbone. Eret offers Dream a hand, and he takes it, pulling himself to his feet.

“You alright there?” Eret asks.

Dream nods, turning back to the fight. TapL and Techno are handling Shadow Singh well, keeping him busy with continuous swings of TapL’s axe and Techno’s light sabre, all while Fundy heals their wounds fast enough to keep them going strong.

Dream joins the fray once more, summoning Seiryu and dishing out an onslaught of icicles. Shadow Singh draws a shield in mid-air, the icicles shattering on impact. However, this provides Techno an opening to blast a beam of light through his back, piercing his chest.

The braces snap and a wave of darkness pulses around them. Dream throws an arm up, grunting

and planting his heels into the ground to avoid getting blown away.

When Dream opens his eyes again, TapL is flying through the air, having fallen victim to an even muscular version of their foe. He crashes into Bad who looses a stray fireball, said fireball burning up an unlucky, nearby Shadow.

Shadow Singh stomps the floor, the earth rising beneath them, uneven stalagmites stabbing the air. Now, a great wall divides Dream, Techno and the rest of their team, its circular shape forming the perimeter of a makeshift arena.

Dream whirls around to face his opponent with Techno ready by his side.

“You two are the most annoying right now,” Shadow Singh says, black aura bleeding from his body. His veins are popping out, visible from beneath his skin. Dream draws his pistol. “I think it’s best if I get rid of you two, and the rest of your team falls apart.”

“He really reminds me of one of those anime villains,” Techno says, cracking his neck.

Dream completely ignores that. “He killed George and I’m going to avenge him.”

“George? Oh, that boy was useful for a while, as long as I kept his sister alive,” Shadow Singh says with a chuckle. “It was too bad that he was too weak to drive a stake through your heart.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Dream grits his teeth. “George wasn’t weak! He was the strongest person I knew!”

“Don’t let him get to you!” Techno growls, but Dream is already rushing him, pistol drawn, bullets fired.

Shadow Singh throws out both hands and fires a beam of white, warning be damned. Dream barely manages to dodge that, rolling and firing a few shots, one of which burrows into Shadow Singh’s leg.

“Dream! Techno! Are you okay?” Skeppy yells from the other side.

Dream doesn’t hear him, jamming his pistol back into its holster when he’s nearly out of bullets. He whips out his dagger, slashing wildly at Shadow Singh. Shadow Singh blocks his attack easily with a raised arm, forcing him back with merely his aura.

Shadow Singh goes for Dream again, fist drawn back. He would have pummelled Dream, broken every single bone in his body had Techno not magicked a dome of cyan around him, unfortunately growing weaker with every hit.

Dream takes this chance and swaps his Persona out to Horus, charging his own beam of white. The moment Techno’s shield splinters and fizzles away, he fires the Megidola beam straight into Shadow Singh’s face.

This seems to have hurt him ever so slightly, as Shadow Singh moves to protect his face with both arms, his body pushed back against the stalagmite walls. Dream doesn’t let up on the offence, thrusting Megidola sphere after sphere, the white crashing into the seemingly-indestructible arena wall. Shadow Singh moves too fast for the spheres to connect, but Dream has to do this.

For George’s sake.

To avenge him.

He has to.

Shadow Singh lunges at Dream and Dream drops to the ground, the former flying over him.

Techno draws his sabre and summons Anat, charging his blade with a blazing aura. He slams it into the ground, emitting a powerful shockwave that throws both friend and foe off their feet. Dream falls painfully on his behind.

“What the hell are you doing, Techno?” Dream snarls.

“As much as I would like to beat the crap out of that guy, we’re going to lose if we attack him recklessly! Do you think you even did a lick of damage to him?”

Techno pulls Dream to his feet and the both of them leap away from each other, narrowly avoiding Shadow Singh’s mighty punch against the ground, the earth rising around the area of impact. With the new stalagmites, Dream’s field of vision is smaller than before. He can sense Techno, mere feet from him, but where is Shadow Singh.

Dream glances from one stalagmite to another, attempting to catch any hint, any *sliver* of Shadow Singh’s presence. A guy with that kind of muscle can’t be that hard to spot!

He’s not coming from the left, nor the right...not the front nor the back...not from above...but from...

The ground rumbles, and Dream leaps into the air. His sluggish movements grants Shadow Singh the chance to grab his ankle, yanking him down, his back smashing into the ground.

Dream grimaces as pain shoots up his spine, black dots dancing in his periphery. Fingers grasp at his throat, pressing down hard against his jugular and Shadow Singh’s triumphant smirk comes into view.

Disgusting.

Detestable.

Dream wants to murder him with whatever he has. However, pinned under Shadow Singh’s immense weight, he is unable to move, unable to actually do anything no matter how he struggles.

Something, or someone, slams into Shadow Singh, knocking him off Dream and air floods his lungs once more. Dream gasps for breath, leaping to his feet and summoning Moloch and blasting Shadow Singh with a pillar of fire, agonized screams ringing out through the room.

Is he dead? Dream runs forward, summoning Horus, about to cast another barrage of Megidola spheres.

[However](#), his knees buckle and he goes tumbling to the ground, wheezing. There’s a burning in his chest, as if someone’s set him on fire. His limbs are about to give out, as heavy as lead.

A shadow looms over him and Dream’s head is forced against the ground, the sole of a foot grinding down against his hair.

“In the end, you can’t even beat me,” Shadow Singh says, digging his heel against Dream’s cheek. “Even though you had this grandiose speech and everything. You’re just useless brats after all.”

Dream wants to stab him. Stab him and riddle his body with bullets till he’s nothing more than a

pile of rotten flesh and jutting bones. Oh, he wants to inflict upon Singh the same *pain* that he did George...However, in his current state, he can barely move.

He catches sight of someone lying a fair distance away, cape charred, his head turned away from him. Is that...Techno?

“Now, I think it’s time to get rid of you. I’ve let you live for far too long.”

This can’t be how it ends. Not before he avenges George. Not before...

Shadow Singh raises a fist, white swirls curling around it. Dream shuts his eyes in resignation.

Then again, what does it matter? After making Singh confess, then what? That wouldn’t bring George back. But if he just lets Shadow Singh kill him here, then...

[Are](#) you giving up?

George?

Seriously? After vowing to avenge me and everything, you let yourself die?

Of course not! It’s just...

You’re the world’s biggest idiot, you know. Hasn’t months as a Phantom Thief taught you that you can’t do everything alone?

Huh?

Dream squeezes open an eye, breath caught in his throat as he realizes just who he’s staring at. George stands with his hands in his pockets, a paler form of his former self.

It’s as if time has slowed. Dream wants to move his mouth, to speak to George, even if it’s for a second longer. George has the most disapproving expression on his face.

Come on, Dream. Stand up. You’re not fighting alone.

[The sharp](#) crack of ice draws both Dream and Shadow Singh’s attention. The stalagmites are all encased in a blanket of ice before shattering around them, scattering glittering crystals all across the arena.

Surrounding them are Fundy, Sapnap, Bad, Skeppy, Eret and TapL, guns aimed straight at Shadow Singh.

TapL hollers, “Everyone! Fire!”

The hailstorm of bullets forces Shadow Singh back and away from Dream. Dream leaps to his feet. Fundy and Bad tend to Techno, while the rest join Dream in his final stand against Shadow Singh.

TapL magics a shield in front of them as soon as Shadow Singh fires off his white beam. To Dream’s satisfaction, the beam bounces off the shield, reflected right back at him. Shadow Singh grunts, the white beam dissipating as soon as it touches his skin.

Dream takes this chance, rushing him with Skeppy, Sapnap and Eret. Eret aims for the skies, bringing forth a storm of arrows, rendering Shadow Singh immobile. TapL protects Dream, Sapnap and Skeppy with temporary shields above their heads, keeping them safe from Eret’s arrows.

“Go!” Skeppy stabs his katana into the ground and, boosted with Sapnap’s burst of electricity, draws up a platform that launches Dream into the air. Dream aims his pistol at Shadow Singh.

Dream senses a presence behind him. A presence who holds his gun steady, who whispers reassurance in his ear.

With one shot, Shadow Singh collapses, black blood oozing from a wound in his chest.

Dream lands deftly on the ground, feet tapping lightly against the carpet. His chest heaves, his limbs sore. And yet, he stands triumphantly before his defeated opponent. Shadow Singh is now clothed once again, back flush against the ground, eyes closed.

[This](#) is it.

Once they take his Treasure, they would have avenged George. Dream turns to his fellow Thieves. Most of them are covered in injuries, their clothes torn, but they’re smiling, weapons sheathed and helping each other.

Something golden floats from above, hovering over Shadow Singh’s limp body. Dream reaches towards it, closing his fingers around the steering wheel, the root of all of Shadow Singh’s desires.

“You’re going to return to your real self now,” Dream says, tucking the steering wheel under his arm, “and you’re going to pay for all you did.”

Shadow Singh doesn’t respond, but from the way he’s vanishing into blue butterflies, Dream knows they’ve succeeded. They’ve banished the tyrant. Dream looks up at the ceiling crumbling around them. Amidst the other Thieves’ panicked yelling, he can’t help but smile.

He’s beaten Shadow Singh. He’s saved the country from Shadow Singh’s control.

Most importantly, he’s avenged George, for both his and Gina’s sakes.

He is led away by Sapnap with a hand on his wrist and they head out of the chamber, prepared to escape Shadow Singh’s warped Ark of Pride.

*

[“Are](#) you certain that this will kill the Thieves?” Singh snarls, a tiny bottle of clear liquid in hand. It wouldn’t even be enough for one gulp.

“That is what Mrs Blade’s research had yielded.” A scientist wrings his hands, trembling in unconcealed fear. “If you induce a temporary state of death, then all cognitive functions cease to work and-“ His eyes widen in alarm. “Sir!”

Singh is already downing the contents, casting the empty bottle aside as soon as he’s done.

He feels faint, dizziness washing over him. The world spins around him and the beating of his heart in his ears begins to slow.

It doesn’t matter what that medicine does. As long as it gives him the smallest chance to kill the Thieves before they bring about their renowned ‘change of heart’, then his position would be safe.

He wouldn’t lose what he spent his entire life working on.

Singh closes his eyes, head against his desk, breathing going awfully shallow.

That's right.

As long as the Thieves die, then nothing else matters.

*

[“The](#) ship's sinking! The ship's sinking!”

Skeppy screeches as Fundy scampers past his feet. Water explodes from around them as the Thieves race down the corridors quickly filling with water. The corridor quickly becomes a steep incline. The Palace is collapsing faster than Dream expected, with piles of rubble falling into their path, water streaming from the outside.

“There!” Dream swings the door at the end wide open, revealing the back deck. Good Lord, they've gone the wrong direction! The point which they had entered the Metaverse had been...

“What now?” Bad cries, watching as the ship begins to sink ever so slowly and steadily. There seems to be no way to get to where the front deck was...is there?

“There are lifeboats!” Eret points out, stabbing a finger in the direction of several small dinghies tethered to the ship's upper level. Following the wire tied to the boat and the complex pulley system involved, Dream notices a lever a fair distance away, attached to a mast near the front of the ship. However, the only way there, through the side deck, is quickly being submerged, water gushing and flooding the walkway.

“I'm gonna go get that lever,” Techno says, summoning Anat, mechanical wings buzzing and whirring. “You guys sit tight and get in the boat.”

Dream nods. Anat, with Techno on board, soars towards the front of the ship. Explosions ring out behind them, a fitting backdrop for an epic escape. As soon as Techno approaches the lever, Techno dismisses her, dropping from the sky and grabbing a hold of it.

Gravity hurtles him towards the water, but Techno is just strong enough to remain hanging, the lever pulled down as a result.

The wires above them begin to unroll, lowering the boat into the water, just the right height for the Thieves to climb on. Fundy is the first to hop in with Dream being the last. Skeppy cuts the wires with his katana and Eret operates the dinghy's engine.

The dinghy speeds off towards Techno, who's still hanging by the lever, looking utterly exhausted. As soon as they fetch him, they can leave the Palace once and for al-

A massive explosion pumps a giant cloud of smoke between them and Techno. Glass shatters, debris splashing into the water. Dream coughs, eyes watering. He wipes at the tears in his eyes as he squints through the black.

When the smoke clears, Dream's heart sinks.

[Techno](#) is gone. The entire mast has been destroyed in that one explosion.

“No,” Eret whispers.

“Techno?” Dream can only stare at the splintered mast, at the apparent lack of *Techno*.

“What the hell,” Skeppy hisses. “What the actual, fucking hell?”

Bad is too stunned to say anything, body having gone rigid.

After all that, is this their reward? Losing yet another friend? Techno? The guy who's so unfazed by everything, grinning as he stares death in the face? The guy whose faith in them has never so much as faltered? Dream refuses to believe it. He goddamn refuses to believe that Techno is fucking dead.

It is Fundy, eventually, who directs the boat back to their starting point, and it is Sapnap who returns them to the real world as the other Thieves stare on in shock. Even as the scenery disappears, replaced by the familiar Parliament Building, surrounded by government workers.

Does cruelty know no bounds? Why can't fate deal them a good hand for once? First George, then Techno... Clay glances around at the rest of his Thieves. Who the fuck is next?

"You guys look like you're attending a funeral. What happened to all the cheer?"

[Clay](#) knows that voice. Goddamn it! He knows that fucking voice...

"Blade?" Harvey is the first to speak, jaw dropped open.

"Yo." Blade holds up a hand. "What's wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I thought you were..." Darryl shakes his head. "We thought you were dead!"

"The Blade never dies. I thought you knew that," Blade says with a chuckle. "Seriously? You actually thought I'd die from that?"

"There was a huge explosion and everything-" Eret trails off. "Yes, we thought you died."

"If there's one thing you should know about me, it's that I never-"

"You never die," Clay says with a sigh. "You scared us all for a moment."

"Great. I don't even need to dress up for Halloween next year."

The Thieves laugh. Clay smiles. Extremely exhausted, they head home for the night.

"Come on," Floris says. "We've got someone to visit, don't we?"

Clay nods. He tells Nick not to wait up for him, and proceeds to wait for the bus, the final one at this time of the night.

*

[??/? - ??? – MIDNIGHT](#)

Clay wakes up to the sound of chains. Funny. He doesn't remember Gina's residence having... chains of any sort. He drags himself to his feet and approaches the cell door once again. Igor grins that usual grin of his as he watches Clay with piercing eyes.

"It seems that you have made a comeback despite the evident lack of support," Igor says calmly. "For that, I have to congratulate you."

Clay nods stiffly. In spite of that victory, something just doesn't feel...quite right, like there's a hole in his heart.

What could possibly be missing? Why does he feel this way?

“It appears that your rehabilitation is coming to a close,” Igor says, chuckling. “My, have you come a long way.” He waves his hand. “Now rest, my Trickster, for you have done well.”

It’s as if Igor has weaved a cunning spell, one that puts Clay to sleep at will. His eyelids droop, tiredness taking over his body as he saunters back to the lumpy mattress.

The date of the election is tomorrow, and boy, is he looking forward to it.

*

Chapter End Notes

Magician arcana rank 8 -> 9 (george)

Fool arcana rank 8 -> 9 (phantom thieves)

Judgement arcana rank 6 -> 7 (igor)

Back To Normal

Chapter Summary

singh's confession

Chapter Notes

hi guys this is the chap for today somehow i managed to pump this out in a couple of hours idek how i did it but please accept :)))

or maybe i just wanted to write them taking exams lmao

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

12/17 – THURSDAY - LATE NIGHT

Singh groans, fingers massaging his temple as he sits upright. The trio of scientists gathered in the room, by his bedside, are discussing something of grave importance amongst themselves, hence the hushed voices, yet they gasp as Singh rouses from his death-like state.

“Mr Singh!” one of the scientist cries.

“Sir! How are you doing?” A second scientist asks as the third fetches him a glass of water.

“I...” Singh’s eyes are shining, watery. “What have I done?”

The scientists halt in their tracks, staring in stunned silence as regretful tears begin to stream down Singh’s face. This is a sight that no one has ever bore witness to, a sight that sends zings of fear down the spines of the scientists.

The medicine did not work. The Phantom Thieves have prevailed again with yet another change of heart.

And that means that everyone who are in positions of power thanks to Singh’s influence will now likely be stripped of those titles. Themselves included.

“Hold a press conference right this instant! Call the police! I cannot be allowed to roam free any longer!” Singh’s sobbing is uncontrollable, his behaviour comparable to that of a newborn’s.

“We cannot do that, sir...”

“What will the public think...?”

Singh doesn’t seem to have heard them. He’s too far gone, drawing his knees to his chest and hiccupping.

“We have to...” The first scientist sighs. “We’ll have to manipulate the media. Newspapers,

televisions, Singh did not have a change of heart – he needs to undergo psychological treatment and observation for now.”

“No offense, but no one is going to believe that.”

“We’ll let the change of heart happen,” the third scientist says. “We’ll talk about our options after that.”

The other two scientists agree. They leave Singh bawling his eyes out in that dark, dark office of his, bearing the weight of his sins crawling upon his back...

*

12/18 – FRIDAY - AFTERNOON

“They said that Singh’s got some announcements to make.”

“As the new President?”

“Maybe? It wasn’t clear.”

The crowd in Valentine Hills is large, with so many people gathered underneath the humongous television screen on the tallest building at the heart of the area. Clay is on his phone, Floris peering over his shoulder as they stand amongst the throngs of people.

“He’s here!”

Clay looks up, watching the exact moment Singh walks up on stage, cameras snapping shots, reporters’ waiting eagerly with microphones in hand.

“Hey.”

Clay glances around to find Blade walking up to him, two cans of coke in hand. He hands one to Clay, who sips at it. Wordlessly, they turn back to the big screen where Singh has lowered his gaze, seemingly unable to speak.

After what must have been an eternity, Singh wails into the microphone. Wails about his awful crimes, about how he used people to get his riches, his position, his power. How he killed. How he ordered his son to kill.

It’s strangely satisfying, Clay thinks. Don’t get him wrong; it’s always satisfying to watch their targets confess and cry on national television, but for some reason, watching Singh do all that is even more rewarding than he had expected. Is it because he’s the biggest target they’ve taken down to date? Maybe.

In any case, he can get used to this. *Very* used to this.

As soon as Singh breaks down, burying his face in his hands, no longer fit for the camera, the broadcast cuts off. The people go back to their daily business, muttering and commenting about how they suppose that Singh truly isn’t the man they thought he was, about how he’s just a lying, murdering bastard.

It bothers Clay...somewhat.

Why isn’t anyone congratulating the Thieves?

When he glances over, Blade is staring at the ground, a forlorn expression on his face. It's rare, Clay thinks, that Blade would ever show that side of him to anyone else.

"You know how that Palace collapsed so suddenly after we stole the Treasure?" Blade asks. "I think my father had something to do with it."

"Your father? How did he know?" Floris asks.

"Well, before my mother suffered a psychotic breakdown, she was studying cognitive science," Blade says, "and after that, her research was stolen."

"So you think that Singh stole it," Clay says.

"Yeah. I mean, who else?" Blade says. "And I think that the one who caused the psychotic breakdown..."

"Is George," Floris says quietly.

Blade nods. "I forgive him, though. I knew he had a reason. If I were him, I think I would have done the same thing."

Clay bites his lip. If someone had threatened George's life, if George knew nothing about the Metaverse, he would have done whatever they said, no matter what. George probably had to go through this so many times, to the point where he had been numb. Another day, another kill, probably.

"Oh well," Blade says, shrugging. "I've got to go now. Exams and all that."

"Exams?"

"Well, mock exams, actually," Blade says. "Got several of those coming up."

"Wait a minute..." Clay lets out a drawn-out sigh. "I have exams."

"So you do," Blade says. "Kinda sucks, if you think about it. The first thing you do when you go back to school is to take exams."

"Don't remind me." Clay waves goodbye to Blade who heads in the opposite direction. With Floris in tow, he heads back to the train station and homeward to hit the books.

*

12/18 – FRIDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

"So, not even Singh could resist a change of heart..." the Special Investigations Unit's director mumbles.

"No." The scientist who had been with Singh shakes his head. "Not even with the special medicine."

"But what do we do now?" Harris Said asks, fidgeting with the hem of his jacket. "With Singh now having a change of heart, all of his associates may be exposed."

"We can't have that," the SIU director agrees. "Moreover, we don't even know if they will remain quiet, now that their power is in jeopardy."

“As is ours,” the scientist says. “Especially if a case is assembled against us.”

“Singh and I have pledged to build a powerful country, a country that can rise against and dispel all threats,” Said says. “We will meet Singh’s expectations by using that other world to eliminate all who get in our way.”

“Hopefully, there will still be some support for Mr Singh,” the SIU director says, pacing about restlessly. “How about this? Mr Markus Singh had fallen victim to the Phantom Thieves before being able to accomplish his goals, and we are to carry his torch...That’s what we’ll tell the mass media.”

A devilish smile creeps up Said’s face as he nods enthusiastically. “Considering that people would be in a panic after losing their leader, they would probably latch onto that immediately.”

“If the general public becomes our enemy, we’re done for,” the SIU director says.

“And we’ll make it such that Mr Singh would require a psychiatric evaluation,” the scientist says.

“Well,” Said says with the most serious expression, “we’re in the same boat. Best for the two of you to remember that...”

*

12/18 – FRIDAY – EVENING

“Help me.”

“No.”

Clay looks over at the arguing duo. Floris is curled up on the bed, tail swishing about, with Nick and Clay poring over their books to prepare for the upcoming examinations.

“Please,” Nick cries.

“You are asking a fox for examination help,” Floris bristles.

“You’re better at maths than me! And you’re only a fox when it’s convenient!”

Clay looks back down at his work, an odd feeling taking hold inside of him. It’s somewhat strange to return to a typical student life, as if battling Shadows and risking his life is now his new normal.

For now, Singh has been taken down, and soon it’ll be time to set their sights on a new target...

After they have faced a student's greatest nightmare, possibly scarier than Shadows themselves...

Examinations.

*

12/20 – SUNDAY – DAYTIME

“I’m so dead.”

“Think that way and half the battle’s lost,” Eret says.

“Anyone want muffins?” Darryl asks. “Or cupcakes? I brought both.”

“You really just want to take a break, don’t you?” Zak sighs, but he’s already reaching for a muffin.

“I thought you didn’t have homework, like, ever,” Gina says.

“Art history,” Zak says between bites of muffin. “And it’s not homework. It’s a graded paper.”

“I bet it sucks.”

Floris snickers and Harvey nearly chokes on saliva when he bursts into laughter. Clay smiles as he leans back against his seat with a muffin in hand.

“Hey, we should have a celebration, since we took down Singh and all,” Nick says. “We haven’t had one since...uh...”

“Since a long time ago,” Darryl says quickly. He claps. “I know! We should have a Christmas party!”

Christmas *is* just around the corner. Clay has completely forgotten about it, with whatever’s been happening recently. Maybe they can have a nice, quiet celebration here, with more stuffed turkey, a nice Christmas log cake...The Thieves are already discussing plans to decorate, plans to bake goodies, to buy Christmas gifts.

“There’s obviously no space to put an actual Christmas tree here,” Zak says. “I know! What about we hold it at Nick’s place?”

“Yeah, Gina needs to get out of the house more too,” Harvey says. “I can always arrange for a limousine...”

“A limousine?” Gina’s eyes are sparkling. “You’re joking!”

“He’s not. I can assure you that,” Blade says with a sigh.

“We can always plan it out after the exams,” Eret says, clearing his throat. “Ten minutes is up. Let’s get back to work.”

There is a collective groan, but the Thieves obey. Clay dips his head, attention turned back to the Biology textbook in front of him.

*

12/21 – MONDAY – MORNING

“What answer did you get for question twelve?”

“Twelve?” Clay racks his brain. “I think it was ‘Holy Grail’.”

“Seriously?” Darryl sighs. “I think I put ‘sword’.”

“How does the heart represent a sword?” Floris laughs, and Darryl only sighs louder.

*

12/22 – TUESDAY – LUNCHTIME

“How many exams are they stuffing in one day?” Harvey is slumped all over the table, his empty

plate placed at one side.

“Because the scheduling department is shitty and they’re just trying to clear the exams up before Christmas,” Eret says.

“This has got to be illegal.”

“Look, at least you guys are having mock exams,” Nick complains, stuffing a mouthful of pasta into his mouth.

They’ve got one more paper in the afternoon and two more tomorrow, and after that, they’re free to go for the holidays. Clay can’t wait, to be honest, for winter vacation. It’s not like he can leave the city, considering he’s still on probation, but at least they have some time to rest and relax.

Oh, and there’s still the Christmas party too. They should go on a shopping trip straight after their final paper. Clay has yet to get Christmas presents, so he definitely needs that shopping trip.

Eret glances at the time on his phone and hurries them up, because if they don’t finish their lunch right this instant, they’re going to be late for their next paper.

*

12/23 – WEDNESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“Exams are over!” Darryl pumps his fists into the air. “Although they’re going to be sending our results by email.”

Clay packs his things up and slings the bag over his shoulder.

“You wanna go shopping for Christmas gifts?” Darryl asks. “We’re free now. No more exams, no more school until January.”

“Oh...yeah. Sure.”

“And after Christmas, we can talk about our next target,” Floris says. “I wonder if we’ll take down people bigger than Singh...”

“We could always go into Mementos,” Darryl says with a hum. They bump into Nick outside, the latter with serious eye bags and a dead expression. Eret and Harvey are descending the stairs at that exact moment, talking animatedly. Probably about the paper they just took.

“Hey,” Nick holds up a hand in greeting. “Wanna go and get Christmas presents with us?”

“There’s probably going to be Christmas sales,” Eret points out. “So now’s the perfect time.”

“We should ask whether the others want to come too,” Floris says. “I mean, Zak and Gina are probably free but still.”

The school is buzzing with activity around them, despite it being the last day before the holidays. Clay catches snippets of their conversations, about how some people are heading back to their hometowns for Christmas, some of them are planning on baking gingerbread men and other Christmas confectionaries.

Clay shivers as he looks up at the snowflakes drifting from the skies. It’s cold. Unbearably so.

Why can’t the cold go away? Why, when surrounded by his friends, does the cold still persist?

Chapter End Notes

knowledge +18 (studying)

To the Depths of Mementos

Chapter Summary

no one's talking about them...

could the general public's collective consciousness have been tampered with?

Chapter Notes

um im hoping this isn't too messy...

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

12/23 – WEDNESDAY – EVENING

“You know, I’ve been thinking.”

“Thinking about what?” Clay asks, gritting his teeth. Wrapping gifts are excruciatingly painful. How does Nick do this with ease? He can hardly get the ribbon on right.

“About the lack of...of reception,” Floris says. “Don’t you think more people would have been talking about us, or even Singh?”

Perhaps. It *has* been bothering Clay a little, ever since Singh confessed.

“It’s like no one cares,” Floris says, shaking his head. “No one cares about Singh anymore. Like... like he’s just a passing fad.”

“It’s worrying.”

“Right,” Floris says. “And I thought that stealing so many Treasures would jog my memory a little but I’m still drawing a blank.”

“About whether you’re human?” Finally. The present looks somewhat...presentable now.

“Yeah.” Floris climbs up the staircase to their shared bed and curls up on Clay’s pillow. “Do you think we’ll ever find out whether I’m human or not?”

“Maybe,” Clay says with a shrug, once more initiating a battle with the wrapping paper. “If you’re worried about the whole people-aren’t-talking-about-us thing we can consult the team tomorrow.”

“On Christmas Eve? Really?”

“Yeah. We should solve it before Christmas or else we won’t be able to enjoy it properly,” Clay says, hissing as he cuts himself again with the edge of the paper. He gives up. He’s just going to ask Nick for help later.

“Okay,” Floris says gratefully. Clay reaches for his phone and proceeds to text the Thieves.

*

12/24 – THURSDAY – DAYTIME

“Okay, so...your grades don’t define who you are,” Darryl says, cupping Zak’s face. “You’re more than just that, Zak.”

“B-But-“

“I didn’t expect you to actually care about your grades, to be honest,” Nick says, attempting to hang up ornaments on the Christmas tree. He yelps when Floris leaps onto his shoulder, arms flailing as he tries to regain balance on the stepladder.

“Let me put up the star! Come on!” Floris cries.

“I’m gonna fucking fall!”

“Language!”

The duo ends up in a heap on the ground anyway. Eret emerges from the kitchen upon hearing the sound, clicking his tongue at the sight before him. Floris scrambles off Nick, the star between his jaws.

Clay peers over from where he’s hanging up the streamers with Blade. They seem to be having fun, as they should be on the day of Christmas Eve.

“Hey. Your side is drooping.”

Clay is jolted from his trance and he moves his end of the streamers higher. “Like that?”

Blade nods and peels off a strip of tape, handing it to Clay. Clay tapes up his side of the streamers and hops from the sofa, stepping backwards to admire his and Blade’s work.

At that moment, the doors open and Harvey steps through with Mr Armstrong and Gina, manoeuvring skilfully between the pieces of furniture.

“Wow,” Gina marvels at the house, the festive decorations sprucing up the homely abode. She turns to Nick. “You *live* here?”

“Neat, huh?” Nick says with a grin.

“Yeah,” Gina says, nodding.

“Maybe once Clay moves out, you can take the bottom bunk and I can move up to the top one.”

Gina laughs at that.

“Is this the Gina you’ve been telling me about?” Mrs Armstrong emerges from the kitchen with a warm smile.

“Yeah, she is,” Clay says, tucking his hands into his pockets.

“Well, all you Thieves are here now, aren’t you?” Mr Armstrong says. “You guys wanted to hold some meeting, I heard? You can use the dining table.”

Clay thanks them and everyone finds a space around the table. Mr and Mrs Armstrong take over the baking for them, heading into the kitchen and shutting the door.

[“So,](#) what’s the meeting about?” Darryl asks.

“Well,” Floris leaps onto the table. “It’s about the public’s reception of us.”

“The public’s reception?” Zak asks. “Like, how they’re totally *not* talking about Singh after he just confessed his crimes in front of the whole country?”

“I did find it strange,” Eret says. “The people have been treating it as if it was no big deal.”

“Nothing on the Phan-Site too, according to Yao Yi,” Clay says, “and there’s nothing about it on the news too.”

“What you’re saying is that there’s been a cover-up,” Blade says.

“Sounds like it,” Gina says, her laptop open in front of her. “I can’t find much on Singh. It’s like everything that has to do with his confession has been erased from the net.”

“If what Blade said is true, then that means that the media is manipulating the cognition of the general public,” Eret says. “And they’re moving the country in the same direction as Singh had.”

[“Wait,](#) so nothing we did has made any impact on society?” Nick asks. “Are you goddamn serious?”

“Apparently,” Floris says.

“I doubt a case can be assembled against Singh, what with all the higher-ups in positions of power,” Blade says. “And if this goes on, we’re spiralling into something really, really... disastrous.”

“And then they’ll start using the Metaverse again, probably, if they find someone like George,” Harvey says.

What happened to George is something that no one should ever experience. Clay clenches a fist and unclenches it. Taking down Singh is not enough. They’ll have to take down the government, the people in power, everyone who has been corrupted by their warped desires.

And they can’t do that without the Metaverse...

Blade echoes that line of thought. Gina places her head in her hand, elbow propped up on the table.

“But that’s a whole lot of work, and I’m not sure how many of them are there,” Gina says, typing rapidly on her laptop. “I mean, it’s not that I can’t get their personal information...”

“What about this?” Floris says. “Since the general public’s cognition is the one being controlled, why not we change that all at once?”

[“You](#) mean...Mementos,” Clay says. “Everyone’s Palace.”

“Precisely,” Floris says. “Mementos is maintained by the public’s collective unconscious, right? If we steal the public’s Treasure, then something’s bound to happen to society.”

“So they’ll realize that Singh is totally a shitty asshole and come to their senses?” Nick says, ignoring Darryl’s “Language!”. “I’m down for that.”

“But just like every other Palace, Mementos is likely to collapse once we steal the Treasure,” Floris says. “That means that the Metaverse could vanish forever.”

The Metaverse...vanishing. Clay stares at his clasped fingers. Mementos falling is one thing, but the entire Metaverse. It had been a world that Clay had come to understand so intimately in such a short time. Had it not been for his accidental entrance into Krones’ castle in April, he would never have made it to where he is now, surrounded by friends and family, by the people and places he loves.

“If there’s even the slightest chance that this could change things, I would choose to do it too,” Eret says.

“Same,” Harvey says.

“I have absolutely no idea what you guys are talking about, but I’ll be cheering on you guys from the sidelines,” Gina says. “If you ever need my help, holler.”

Clay stands. “Let’s settle this today and we can have a nice Christmas Eve when we come back.”

The trust between the Thieves grow ever stronger. Their bond is solid, as if nothing can ever break it.

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast turned a vow into a blood oath. It shall become the wings of rebellion and break the yoke of thy heart. Thou hast awakened to the ultimate secret of the Fool, granting thee infinite power...

The Thieves agree. Clay turns to leave, only noticing Mrs Armstrong standing by the kitchen doorway, her arms folded.

“Heading out again?” she asks.

“Yeah,” Clay says. “We’re destroying the Metaverse. For good.”

“I see,” Mrs Armstrong says with a small smile. “We’ll have a nice Christmas Eve dinner waiting for you when you get back. No later than seven. All of you.”

Clay nods. With a wave of his hand, he leads his Thieves out of the house, headed straight for Valentine Hills.

Mementos. It is a place of mystery, characterised by its spidery veins, leading deeper and deeper into the earth, its size astronomical. They had trained there, beaten up powerful Shadows there, had their ups and downs and intimate talks.

It’s time to find out what lies in its depths, once and for all.

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast acquired a new vow. It shall become the wings of rebellion that breaketh thy chains of captivity. With the birth of the Justice Persona, I have obtained the winds of blessing that shall lead to freedom and new power...

*

[“The](#) Meta-Nav is reacting,” Eret says.

Dream glances down at his phone. Indeed, a new area of Mementos has opened up beyond that of the Path of Sheriruth – the Path of Iweleth. Unlike that of the previous Paths, this one appears

shorter.

“Come on,” Sapnap says. “Let’s go and check it out.”

The Thieves make their way down the stationary escalator to the next platform. All but one. Dream cocks his head, watching as Fundy stares blankly at the ground.

“Are you okay?”

“What do you think we’ll find?” Fundy asks. There’s no mistaking the worry in his voice.

“Your true identity, probably,” Dream says. “If you ask me, you’re a hundred per cent human.”

“Really?” Fundy grins, teeth bared. “Um...thanks for believing in me, after everything. It...It really means a lot to me.”

“It’s no problem,” Dream says with a smile.

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast turned a vow into a blood oath. It shall become the wings of rebellion and break the yoke of thy heart. Thou hast awakened to the ultimate secret of Fortune, granting thee infinite power...

He notices a faint, flickering shape behind Fundy. A svelte figure sporting an azure skin and flaring wings by its ankles stares down at him intimidatingly. Dream merely nods, and Mercurius returns it. It morphs into a glowing sphere, fusing with Fundy’s very core.

“Hey, are you guys coming?” TapL calls from the escalator.

Dream jerks his head towards TapL, and Fundy nods. Together, they follow the rest of the team, making their way down deeper and deeper into Mementos.

*

[Upon](#) Dream’s touch, the final door standing between them and the depths of Mementos springs open, revealing to them the path of Iweleth.

Iweleth seems to stretch on forever, the path flanked by even more pulsing veins, strange lampposts hanging over their heads, scattering pools of light on the ground, illuminating their path.

The soft screams have now turned into what appears to be incomprehensible mumbling, similar to the scratching of nails on a blackboard. Whatever lies ahead must not be pleasant. Still, to reach the depths, they need to face this head on.

With every step through the corridor, the mutterings become louder and louder.

“I don’t want to think anymore.”

“I can’t shoulder this burden anymore.”

“Responsibility’s too much to handle...”

The voices seem to come from further in. At the end of the corridor is a platform with rails on either side, trains pulling up to said platform. Cognitive passengers file out from the carriages, crowding the platform but ignoring the Thieves completely.

“What’s that?” Bad points to a door in the distance, the same as those that had hindered their

descent through Mementos. That is where most of the cognitive beings have gathered around, wailing and pleading to be let in. It's almost disturbing, how they attempt to climb over each other but with a certain sort of lethargy in their behaviour.

"They look like zombies," Skeppy says.

"In any case, we're not going to be able to find our way in with all those people there," Eret says.

Dream is already walking towards the edge of the platform which ends in a deep abyss. There is a narrow ledge that would allow them to bypass the door. It's dangerous, but better than nothing.

The Thieves follow his lead without complaint, shuffling down the ledge, relaxing only when they've reached the other side. The road continues in a straight path, the walls and floor plastered with pulsating veins, the air filled with quiet shrieks and incoherent murmurings.

Dream shivers. It's as if something can just jump out and attack them at any moment.

"This is the depths...of Mementos," Techno says, looking around like a sightseeing tourist. "Is this supposed to be creepy?"

Dream hums. The path is littered with unique jail cells, boxes splashed with red and black with cognitive beings – or are they Shadows? – sitting within, holding their heads. They don't seem to acknowledge the Thieves when they approach, nor react when Bad or Eret attempt to speak with them.

"Are these Shadows?" Sapnap asks, brows knitted.

"Seems like it," Fundy says.

"But what would Shadows be doing locked up like prisoners?" Skeppy asks.

Fundy shrugs. It looks like he has no idea as well. Dream presses on. The sooner they reach the depths, the sooner they'd find an answer to their questions. The winding path leads to a circular room lined with jail cells, countless Shadows trapped behind bars.

One of the prisoners seems to have caught Bad's attention, because he stops in his tracks.

"Wait, look at that!" Bad grabs Dream's shoulder.

"Is that...oh my God." Sapnap's jaw drops. Dream shrugs off his irritation at the interruption and turns, noticing a familiar face sitting, undeniably relaxed with a dreamy expression on his face, in one of the cells.

It's Peter Krones' Shadow, minus the kingly attire and smug attitude.

"Oh, it's you," Shadow Krones says, that languid smile on his face. "Noveschosch, was it?"

"Yes..." Bad starts, fingers tugging at the hem of his cloak. Sapnap and Fundy moves to step between the two.

"Relax," Shadow Krones says, leaning back against the wall of the cell. "I'm over that life. All I need to do now is to submit to the higher-ups, right? Then I wouldn't have to think for myself anymore."

Coming from Shadow Krones' mouth, it's unnatural. This is the guy who had had let his twisted desires take root and fester in his heart. In Dream's eyes, he'd always been an irredeemable bastard

and to spout something subdued like this is just strange.

Out of the corner of his eye, he's realized that there are other people he recognizes as well - Marion, Kris and Singh. Not the real people but their Shadows. None of them even looks visibly threatening, each slumped against the wall or staring listlessly out of the cell, eyes unseeing.

Unsettling.

Techno walks up to Shadow Singh, who seems to respond when he approaches.

"What are you doing here?" Techno asks, genuine confusion in his monotonous voice.

"What am I doing here?" Shadow Singh asks lazily. "*You* were the ones who put me in here."

What is that supposed to mean?

"I'm sure you've noticed that everyone has twisted desires," Shadow Singh says, turning with his back to them, fingers clasped behind his back. "That is why Shadows exist. The difference between Palace rulers and normal Shadows is that we have the courage to act on those desires."

"What do you mean?" Eret asks.

"Perhaps you could see it as a form of rebellion against society's expectations," Shadow Singh says with a sigh, his shoulders sagging. "By robbing us of those desires, you have essentially forced us here. While it may sound like a horrible deed, it's not terrible here. In fact, I wonder why I hadn't surrendered to this control in the past."

"So we've...what've we been doing?" Sapnap shakes his head.

Dream doesn't have an answer to that, nor does the rest of the Thieves, it appears. They are in the right. They were doing no more than reforming society. If not for what they had done, stealing the Treasures of these criminals' hearts, then there would be many other people living silently in pain.

They are in the right...aren't they?

["Intruders!"](#)

Dream whirls around at that, eyes widening when he realizes the presence of a Shadow guard spewing black goo from its mouth, transforming into that of a metallic angel.

The angel attacks first, hurling a mechanical fist at them. Dream barely manages to dodge it, leaping into the air and firing a blazing bullet charged with the power of Moloch's fire. The bullet pierces the angel's head, scattering it into a pile of ashes.

"Let's go, quickly," TapL says, "before the rest of them find us."

Dream cannot agree more. He holsters his pistol and waves a hand, leading the team further into the depths of Mementos.

*

Fortune arcana rank 9 -> 10 MAX (fundy)

Fool arcana rank 9 -> 10 MAX (Phantom Thieves)

Justice arcana rank 0 -> 2 (Tricksters of Justice)

The Holy Grail

Chapter Summary

the thieves find the treasure that lies at the end of mementos

Chapter Notes

hello im back the previous chapter probably exhibited a dip in writing standards oops but ive made a comeback with this one, i hope!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

12/24 – THURSDAY – DAYTIME

“What is this?”

From the ceiling hangs a cluster of veins that descend even further downwards. Just how far does Mementos go down? A spiralling ramp allows them passage to an even deeper part of the Palace.

“It’s going to take forever if we walk,” Fundy says, morphing into the Fundybus. “Come on.”

The Fundybus zooms down the ramp, wheels screeching against the smooth, waxy floor. The journey is swift, and the Thieves find themselves on the next level, where the veins meld into the floor.

Dream glances around. Complex machinery made of fleshy unknown substances surround them, the floor made of adjoining circular panels. Weird design choice.

“Shadows,” Eret warns. Dream catches sight of them, acting like prison guards to the numerous Shadows kept locked up here. The more they explore, the more cells they see, the louder the muttering gets. It’s beginning to grate on Dream’s ears, and he doesn’t like it one bit.

Skeppy traps a couple of Eret’s light spheres in ice balls of his own, handing the freezing smoke bomb to Dream. Dream rolls it out into the guards’ path before shooting it with his pistol. The ice ball explodes, the light released and blinding the guards, giving the Thieves the opportunity to attack them from the unseen, shooting them in the head and stabbing them, taking out three guards at once.

A clatter catches Dream’s attention. Glancing at the direction of the noise, Dream notices a plate that one of the Shadows has dropped. It is weighty, and has an indentation on one side and a peculiar pattern on the other, drawn in ink as red as the vessels around them. Will this be useful to them?

Might as well carry it with him. It’s weighty, but not to the point where it will slow them down. The rest of the Thieves are already making their way down the path climbing up and down the uneven terrain, cleverly using ledges and hooks to cross chasms that can plunge them into an

endless void.

However, they soon come to a blockade – a door with a button. Dream presses the button, and the ground lights up beneath them with a yellowish glow. Walls rise up around them, trapping the Thieves in this tiny space.

“What’s up with the floor?” TapL taps his foot. The floor doesn’t react.

Techno walks to the edge of the round panel they are on, staring at the adjacent panel for a mere second before crossing over. Upon doing so, the panel he stands upon flashes blue.

“I think I get it,” Eret says, rubbing his chin. “We have to make all these panels blue.”

“So it’s like a puzzle?” Sarnap says, sighing.

“Well, it’s not going to solve itself,” Dream says, walking towards Techno. “Come on.”

Apparently, stepping on a blue panel again would turn it back yellow. While Dream, Techno and Eret had been rather confident about their puzzle-solving abilities, no matter where they step, even with backtracking, there remains at least one yellow panel.

“There’s something not quite right about this,” Eret says. They must have been wandering around the small space for what feels like hours. Dream anticipates the onset of a headache.

“If only we can use this space,” Techno says, rapping his knuckles on the middle in the middle of the squarish room. He narrows his eyes, fingers running along its sides.

“You find something?” Fundy asks.

“There’s a groove here,” Techno says, squinting at the wall. “I think something’s supposed to fit inside.”

A groove? Could it be...? Dream walks over to where Techno is standing, whipping out the disk that he’s snatched off one of the Shadow guards just a little earlier. Carefully, he holds the disk against the groove, the indentation sliding into place with little resistance.

The pillar rumbles and it sinks into the ground, providing them a flat grey panel upon which they can stand. Maybe with this, they will be able to solve the puzzle.

As expected, getting all panels to glow a sea blue is no longer impossible once that grey panel existed. The door that impeded their progress is now swallowed by the ground, the veins wrapped around it retreating into the walls, granting them access to yet another round room.

There are no muttering Shadows here. In fact, the only noteworthy aspect of this room is what seems to be a heavily-guarded jail cell, embraced by cold, silver chains. Its door does not even comprise of iron bars. Instead, it is a white slab with a giant red padlock, and Dream suspects that no amount of lockpicking will ever get that open.

[“Quarantine](#) cell.” TapL reads from the sign above the door.

“Must be some kind of dangerous criminal they’re keeping in here,” Bad says.

“It could just be another random Shadow,” Dream says, shrugging. This place is full of Shadows. Dream wouldn’t be surprised if it’s just something really strong contained in there.

“Hey, don’t zone out,” Sarnap says, nudging at the back of Fundy’s head with his cudgel.

“Huh? I’m not,” Fundy says indignantly. He turns back to the cell. “Something about this cell seems familiar.”

“Did you escape from here?” Skeppy asks. “Like, did you live here?”

“If he did, the chains probably wouldn’t be there anymore,” Techno says. Perhaps not, then.

Fundy sighs exasperatedly, scratching his head. “Nope. No good. Can’t remember anything.”

“Maybe you will soon,” Bad says reassuringly. “Let’s keep going down. Maybe there’ll be other stuff that will jog your memory.”

Fundy nods.

Dream spins on his heels, hearing their footsteps before he even sees them. Guards have arrived, clutching their batons.

[“There](#) they are!” The first guard transforms into an angel-like creature, carrying with it a harp, a satin stole around its neck. Dream summons Skadi, drawing up a hailstorm that utterly batters the angel. The other Shadow transforms into a woman with pearly white skin and a forked tongue, a snake coiled around her shoulders.

“Run!” Dream shouts. TapL takes the lead, shoes barely making a sound against the ground as he leads the rest of the Thieves deeper into Mementos. Dream fires off a final barrage of dark spheres at the Shadows before following the others.

Skeppy and Bad are sniping Shadows converging in front of them with their guns, bullets pelting the Shadows like raindrops during a downpour. Most of the Shadows can be eradicated this way, save for a single, slimy abomination that seems to eat up all their bullets. Its gelatinous body reeks of rotting flesh and other, unidentifiable stench. It does not seem to have noticed them, minding its own business as it slides about, leaving behind a gooey trail as it does.

It radiates a dangerous aura, enough for alarm bells to ring in Dream’s mind.

“In here!” Fundy shouts, pushing open a door. The Thieves rush in one by one, feet crushing Shadows that spawn from the ground. Dream barrels through and Fundy slams the door behind him with a resounding bang. Dream struggles to catch his breath and he looks around.

[They](#) are in a safe room. The comfort it offers is comparable to that of the safe rooms in Krones’ Palace. The furniture is hard, made up of ebony wood inscribed with red, swirling patterns. Goo drips from above, forming pools of black on the ground.

Dream blinks as a droplet of goo lands on his nose.

“That was close,” Sapnap says, leaning against the backrest of the bench.

“I think we’re getting really close to the end,” Fundy says. “We just need to push on a little more.”

Dream wonders about what they will find at the end of Mementos. What would the public’s Treasure look like? Will it be gold and shiny, like how Krones’ and Kris’ Treasures had been, or will it be something like that of Marion’s or Lee’s, where its value lies in its sentimentality alone?

For now, though, he figures he should get some rest and recover some strength in his sore limbs.

He’s not going to be able to wake up tomorrow without an ache in his arms and legs, which is

going to be a pretty terrible experience on Christmas Day.

“The coast is clear,” TapL says as he peeks out the door. Dream can believe that – he does not sense the heightened security anymore. If that strange Shadow is still outside, however, they are going to have to make a run for it.

“Alright,” Dream says, standing. The soles of his feet complain, but there’s no complaining to be had when they have a society to steal from. Backed by the rest of his team, Dream leaves the safe room, running down the staircase that will take them to a shrine in the distance, the shroud of mist surrounding it only adding to its mystery.

There is no other way forward, so the Treasure that they have come for will have to be there. Of that, Dream is certain.

*

“I can sense the Treasure from within,” Eret says. They stand at the entrance of the shrine, which, apparently, houses a single, narrow corridor that leads to a spiral staircase descending further into the ground. With how low into the ground they’re going, Dream is somewhat intrigued by the fact that they have yet to reach the core of the earth.

Then again, this is the Metaverse, so that kind of logic probably won’t work here.

“I’m not sure what we’re going to encounter inside, so…” Fundy looks over to Dream. “Are you ready?”

Dream nods. “As ready as I’ll ever be.”

“Right then,” Sapnap says, walking ahead. “Let’s get going.”

The staircase seems to stretch forever, going down…down…down and down even more. Is it just Dream, or is the temperature dropping rapidly? His breath comes out in puffs of misty white. Chills travel up his arm, hairs on the back of his neck standing on end.

A glint off a golden surface catches Dream’s eye. They’ve reached the bottom of the shrine, and what must be the absolute lowest level of Mementos. What awaits them appears to be a golden goblet, gems of every colour imaginable embedded on its smooth surface. The most suspicious element of this surreal sight is the web of veins that disappear past the cup’s brim, each tube pulsing to its own inaudible rhythm.

“Is that the Treasure?” Skeppy asks.

“Wait a minute,” Fundy says, throwing out a paw. “Something’s not right.”

Just then, an ominous laughter resonates within the chamber. A deep, familiar voice speaks directly in their minds, tickling at their skulls.

“You’ve done well to make it this far, Phantom Thieves.”

“Is that…The Treasure’s *talking* to us!” Eret cries.

“I’ve stolen two Treasures, actually only stolen one, but I’m sure that Treasures don’t talk,” Techno says.

The goblet continues, completely ignoring them. “I am the Holy Grail, the ruler of this Palace.”

“Wait, the *Treasure’s* the ruler?” TapL exclaims.

“Apparently,” Fundy says. “The Treasure’s too big to take out of here, but we just have to get rid of it and the public should come to their senses.”

“So we’re going to destroy it,” Techno says, drawing his ray gun. “I like that idea. A whole lot.”

[The](#) Holy Grail chuckles, and Dream can sense the malicious tone behind that laughter. The shrine rumbles and cracks begin to fork along the walls. The shattering of the concrete is loud enough to rupture Dream’s eardrums, debris falling to the ground and vanishing as soon as it touches the ground. Dream freezes, stunned at the scene before him.

Surrounding them in a circular fashion are thousands upon thousands of jail cells, a Shadow sitting within each. The mutters and murmurs are getting louder, sometimes evolving into outright screams. Dream resists the urge to cover his ears.

“Don’t you dare take the Holy Grail away from us!”

“Yeah! Leave it alone, you fucking Thieves!”

Bad whimpers. “What’s happening?”

A beam of light shines in Dream’s periphery and he manages to switch to Vasuki fast enough to erect a shield tinged with blue. The beam of light ricochets off one of the jail cell’s doors, crashing into the ceiling. What was that?

“That thing isn’t sitting around and letting itself get destroyed,” Techno says.

For once, there doesn’t seem to be any weaker Shadows emerging from the walls or floor, so the Thieves are able to focus their efforts on the Holy Grail, the big boss of everyone’s Palace. Its exterior is as tough as diamonds; their bladed and bludgeoning weapons unable to do any damage to it. Guns have limited effect as well, but it isn’t long before they run out of bullets.

It seems their Personas are the way to go. Bad and Skeppy perform their combined attack, pelting the Holy Grail with fireballs and hailstones alike. Eret showers the battlefield with a thousand arrows. TapL and Techno charge their bullets with cyan and magenta, exploding upon contact with the cup. Sappnap and Fundy team up to unleash their deadly thunderstorm combination attack, and Dream stirs up a barrage of darkness.

Despite the amount of energy they are pouring into their attacks, nothing seems to work. Every dent is fixed immediately, every scratch gone in a second.

“Stop destroying it!”

“Get away from it!”

“We won’t let you!”

Shut up! Dream glares at the people screaming around them, jaw clenched. What is *up* with these Shadows? Don’t they want to be free? Why are they trying to stop them?

An invisible force hurls Dream through the air. He grunts, pain tearing through him as he hits the ground. He leaps to his feet, throwing an arm up to protect his eyes from its searing flash. When he opens them again, the veins above its brim glow a disturbing blood-red, relieving the Holy Grail of any injuries it has sustained.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” Sapanap pants, a hand on his kneecap.

Perspiration drips from Techno’s forehead as Anat flickers behind him like a dying fame on a candle. Eret staggers to his feet. Bad leans on Skeppy’s shoulder, bleeding from a blow to his forehead. His Thieves are running out of energy. This battle is going south fast.

“We didn’t even do anything to it!” TapL exclaims.

“It’s not that,” Fundy says, fur matted with red, his jacket torn. “The people are healing it!”

Is that what those veins are for? Dream follows the tendrils, coming to the startling realization that those veins do connect to the cells, to the prisoners seated within. The very same prisoners who embody the twisted desires of their real world counterparts.

What is their deal here? Why do they not want to be freed from this goblet’s control? Why are they so willing to submit themselves to this abomination?

“Abomination? You cannot be further from the truth.” Dream grits his teeth, tightening his grip on his pistol. That thing is speaking in his mind again. “I am what the public wants. The public wishes to be imprisoned, their every action and thought dictated for them.”

“That’s not possible!” Bad shouts, before trailing off. “How can...How can that be what the public wants?”

“It is an unconscious desire, one that not even they are aware of,” the Holy Grail says. “Naturally, they will not sit by idly while you attempt to eradicate the object of their desire.”

The Holy Grail begins to glow again, this time with an even higher intensity. The Shadows’ groaning and screeching are at peak volume now, bordering on unbearable. Dream slams his fingers into his ears, squeezing his eyes shut, willing the noises to just go away.

All of a sudden, the voices are gone and the cold is back. When Clay opens his eyes, he’s back on the snowy streets of Valentine Hills.

*

Chapter End Notes

i think p4's a new world fool would suit the holy grail better than rivers in the desert...

Justice arcana rank 3 -> 4 (Tricksters of Justice)

Make Your Choice: 12/24

Chapter Summary

dream has to make a choice. One that will decide the fate of the world...

Chapter Notes

hello im back with another make your choice chap. make the right choice and the story continues. make the wrong one and you will get a bad ending, or what i'd like to call a neutral ending :)

pls don't click "next chap" lol just click on the hyperlinks of the options

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

12/24 – THURSDAY – DAYTIME

Nick picks himself up, rubbing at his back, glancing around. Eret holds his arm, a giant gash across his forearm.

“God, I hate this,” Harvey mutters, popping his shoulder joint back into its socket without so much as a scream of pain. “We didn’t even do a lick of damage to that thing!”

“We have to come up with some kind of game plan,” Floris says. “Obviously we can’t steal the Treasure since it’s so big, so we have to find a way to destroy it.”

“Wait,” Clay says, holding a finger to his lips. A car’s horn blares nearby, and Clay whips his head around. The traffic light right beside them has turned green, and people are crossing the road. A girl brushes past Clay, speaking very loudly on her phone. A businessman hurries home, briefcase in hand.

“It’s not just me, huh,” Blade says, folding his arms.

“It’s like...” Darryl fidgets restlessly. “It’s like no one’s...noticed we just popped out of nowhere.”

At that, Zak, Nick and Harvey throw furtive glances around, brows furrowed. Darryl’s right. People are just going about their lives. No one’s even *questioning* how they’ve just magically re-entered the real world in the middle of one of the busiest streets in Fariold.

Clay stumbles as a tremor takes hold of the earth. He lifts his head in time to watch a skeletal structure rise from the ground, similar to the bone of a ribcage, lined with what appears to be pulsing with blood vessels.

More and more skeletal structures spring up around them, much to the Thieves’ surprise. The sky is stained an unnerving crimson. Red rain falls from above, showering the city with those cursed droplets pooling at their feet, soaking their shoes.

The most shocking thing of all is the fact that everyone else is going about their day peacefully, as if unable to see the apocalypse happening right in front of them. Hell, a boy with a balloon runs up to his mother who scoops him up into her arms, both drenched with red but they don't seem to care.

[“What’s](#) going on?” Clay mumbles, before a headache assaults him. He drops to a knee, the throbbing in his temples getting too much for him to handle. Nick crashes to the ground beside him, spraying snow into the air.

What’s happening? What’s happening?
what’s happening what’s happening god it hurts it hurts someone please help

“No!”

Clay forces one eye open as the pain evolves into agony. However, a chill runs down his spine at what he sees before him.

Darryl’s feet have vanished into strips of ash, wisps of black evaporating into the air.

“Why? What the fuck?” Zak screams, eyes shining as he holds up his arms, his hands having completely vanished.

“I don’t want to die! Oh my G-!” Harvey shrieks, his entire body dissipating into a cloud of black.

One by one, with an anguished cry, the Thieves disappear. First, it had been Harvey, then Eret, then Nick, then Darryl, then Zak, then Blade, and finally, only Clay and Floris remain.

“I...” Floris looks like he wants to speak. His lower half is already gone. His chest is heaving, the fear radiating off his body ever so blatantly. “I didn’t know this would happen. I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry...”

Clay reaches out to him, fingers scraping the concrete of the pavement as his arm falls, lacking the energy to even move anymore, only for Floris to completely dissolve in front of his eyes.

Clay’s chest constricts. He cannot feel his legs, nor his stomach. The only thing he can hear in his ears is the pounding of his heart, the sucking of air through his mouth, the despair rattling his skull.

His friends are gone.

He’s all alone now.

Clay rolls onto his back, an arm thrown over his forehead, red rain seeping into his very pores. He shuts his eyes, surrendering himself to the soothing wave that crashes over his body, washing away the pain, promising him quick relief.

Clay shuts his eyes, and his body becomes nothing more than tendrils curling into the skies.

*

[12/24 – THURSDAY – DAYTIME](#)

“It seems that you have failed.”

Clay grasps the bars of the prison’s cell door. “Failed? I don’t get it.”

“Naturally. One cannot truly understand the thoughts of higher powers, after all,” Igor says calmly.

“I had high hopes for you, Trickster. However, it appears that those hopes were unfounded.”

“Wait! What do you mean?” Clay rattles the bars. “Where are my friends?”

Igor ignores him. “Your world and Mementos is being fused as we speak. Having disappeared from the public’s cognitions, you can no longer exist in the real world as well.”

“What do you mean?” Clay repeats. Mementos and the real world are fusing? He and his friends have disappeared from people’s cognitions? This doesn’t make any sense!

“Shut up!” Caroline kicks the bars and Clay stumbles back, tensing. “You didn’t meet our Master’s expectations and still want to talk back to him?”

“Your rehabilitation will remain uncompleted,” Justine says, frowning. “It is a shame.”

“Justine. Caroline. You must purge the Trickster of his pitiful existence,” Igor says. “As the master of the Velvet Room, that is what I decree to you.”

Purge? It can mean what Clay think it is, right? Surely not.

Justine merely touches the cell’s door and it blinks away, scattering into blue butterflies. With a flick of Caroline’s baton, Clay is dragged out of the cell by an unseeable force, arms bound tightly with invisible ropes. He clenches his jaw as he is brought before Igor, with Caroline and Justine standing between them.

This can’t be how it ends. Not here. Not now.

Where are his friends? What about that Holy Grail that imprisoned the public’s very will? Their job as the Phantom Thieves isn’t done, and hell if Clay is going to die here before they can steal their final Treasure!

[A burst](#) of energy zings through Clay. In a flash of light, his clothes change from his tattered prisoner’s outfit to his emerald green coat, hands clad in red gloves. With concerted effort, Dream rips apart the invisible shackles that bind him, freeing him from Justine and Caroline’s hold.

“What?” Caroline stares, wide-eyed, as a shape flickers behind Dream. Dream gasps, lungs struggling to take in oxygen as his body tries to contain the power flowing through him.

“By our Master’s orders, we have to purge him,” Justine says. She calls upon the power of the Persona, summoning Bugs and hurling spheres of darkness at Dream. With a single swipe of his dagger, Dream sends a wave of energy with equal intensity, deflecting Caroline’s barrage and hurtling them back at her.

“Justine!” Caroline throws up a shield, blocking the spheres. The twins turn back to Dream, overflowing with raw energy, panting harshly. He has to save his friends. He has to steal the Holy Grail, the final Treasure. As long as he remains standing, he will beat down whoever gets in his way.

“Something’s...not right,” Justine says, holding her head. “Are we supposed to purge him?”

“That’s what our Master said!” Caroline cries. “You’re not going against him now, are you?”

“No, I...” Justine shakes her head, her palms flat against her temples as she sinks to one knee. “I’m remembering something. This is...this is not rehabilitation, Caroline. We have been manipulated the whole time.”

[With](#) those words, Caroline seems to be hit with some sort of realization as well. Wincing, she squeezes her eye shut, baton dropping to the ground. The power ebbs from Dream as he regains his senses. What is happening with the twins?

“What’s the matter?” Igor asks.

Justine rises and turns towards Igor, her back to Dream. She stabs a finger at him.

“You are not our Master,” Justine voice is heavy with conviction. “How dare you assume his face!”

“Igor” doesn’t look fazed at all. He merely chuckles, his wide grin ever-present.

“You imprisoned our Master,” Caroline continues, standing by Justine. “Our body has been torn into two.” She and Justine exchange glances.

“We are not executioners, but rehabilitators,” Justine says. “That is the truth that we had forgotten.”

“You were originally one?” Dream asks.

“Indeed,” Justine says, folding her arms. “We were not always Justine and Caroline.”

“Inmate!” Caroline brandishes her baton at Dream. “You are going to have to fuse us.”

“Fuse you?”

“Yes.” Justine nods. “For us to fully regain our powers, we will have to become whole again.”

Dream nods. He’s done this a million times – fusing Personas – but it has always been Justine and Caroline behind the guillotines. Meanwhile, “Igor” watches on, fingers clasped together, as if enjoying a show.

[Dream](#) gulps and walks over to the guillotines, the twins fearlessly placing their necks on the lunette where the blades will land. All Dream needs to do is to release the ropes and the fusion will be complete. Easy.

He holds his breath. Justine and Caroline peer up at him with determined eyes, renewing the diminishing hope within him. Dream shuts his eyes, braces himself, and lets go of the ropes.

He hears the sing of the blades as they fall, slicing through the air and, inevitably, the necks of the twin wardens. The flare of energy has Dream’s eyes snapping open with an arm thrown up. The bright light blinds him, forcing him to squint at the childlike figure that stands against the glow.

A girl emerges from the light, clad in a dress of blue and gold, a gleaming butterfly ornament weaved into her hair. Tucked under her arm is a thick book, yet another golden butterfly inscribed upon its cover.

The girl bows to Dream. “I have been right to trust you, my dear Trickster. My name is Lavenza.”

Lavenza. The Velvet Room attendant who was torn in two to form Justine and Caroline. She turns to “Igor”, contempt evident on her features. “Igor” chortles.

[“Once](#) again, you have exceeded my expectations, Trickster.”

“Igor” begins to hover, surrounded by black flames tinged with red. He spreads his arms, his body

soon coated with black goo, revealing only crimson eyes.

“You have done well to look past the fog and to discover the truth. That, I will applaud you,” “Igor” says. “What Lavenza said is correct. I am not the true Igor, but rather Yaldabaoth, the god of control.”

“The god of control?” Dream asks, assuming his battle stance.

“Surely you have seen the general public. The people whom you have sworn to protect from Markus Singh’s reign of terror. They wish for nothing more than the freedom from responsibility,” Yaldabaoth says. “They want to live their lives in ignorant bliss. They’d rather give up their freedom to avoid responsibility for their actions.”

“That’s...” Dream finds himself faltering. Is that true? No one had congratulated the Thieves, celebrated Singh’s fall from grace. Is that...Is that the general public’s true colours?

“I had thought that someone like you, someone who rebels against society, would be able to *change* the nature of the public’s consciousness. Alas, it was a futile attempt,” Yaldabaoth says. “Now all that remains is to fuse Mementos with your world, and there will be peace.”

“Trickster, do not listen to him,” Lavenza warns.

Ignoring Lavenza completely, Yaldabaoth extends a hand to Dream.

“I will offer you a deal now, Trickster,” Yaldabaoth says, a creepy smile emerging on his shadowy face. “I can revert the world back to one overrun with distorted individuals. The name of the Phantom Thief will be known far and wide, praised and revered. None shall dare defy you again.”

Dream bites his lip. Should he...take up the offer?

If he refuses, there’s a chance the Metaverse could disappear, and he’d remain a powerless youth in this ruthless society. Yet, if he agrees, he’d be famous beyond belief, feared and respected.

“So, what will it be, Trickster?” Yaldabaoth asks tauntingly. “Will you walk the path of strife, or the path of glory?”

[“I accept the offer.”](#)

[“I refuse.”](#)

Chapter End Notes

hope you made the right choice!

Judgement arcana rank 7 -> 8 (yaldabaoth)

Fame and Fortune

Chapter Summary

"fame and fortune"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

12/24 – THURSDAY – DAYTIME

Lavenza can only stare, wide-eyed, as Dream takes measured steps towards Yaldabaoth, a grin plastered across his face as he spreads his arms.

What did the public even do for him anyway? They branded him a delinquent, they are the reason that distorted individuals like Singh rose and proceeded to exert his power over them. They are the reason George is dead.

Dream can never forgive society for creating such wretched people. Why not lord over them and set them on the right path?

“Yaldabaoth,” Dream says. “I want to be your vassal.”

Yaldabaoth responds with a mirroring smile.

“I...” Lavenza drops her gaze. “It seems that not even fate could have predicted the actions of the Trickster...”

“Very well,” Yaldabaoth says. “It seems that you are unable to resist the desire of your heart. You truly are a child of man.”

Dream closes his eyes and unimaginable power courses through him. His veins thrum with the pulse of the power, a fraction of Yaldabaoth’s own strength. He has the authority to rule alongside Yaldabaoth, the authority to decide to whom he should enact a change of heart.

None shall dare defy the Phantom Thief who continues to do good for the country, reforming society through his vigilantism.

For some reason, Dream feels like he’s forgetting something. Something very important.

Several faces flash in his head, their expressions those of resignation, of fear, of anger, of betrayal, of despair.

S_pnap...Ba_...ndy...ke_p...E__t...T_p...e__n...

What are those names?

_in...Ge__g...

Why do they sound so familiar?

Dream clenches his jaw as pain arrows through his head. It's as if he's been hit with a sledgehammer. Any attempts to recall those names or the identities of those people are now rendered impossible, for those people have been cleansed from Dream's memories.

Dizziness takes a hold of him for a mere second, and upon Yaldabaoth's command, Dream opens his eyes.

[He's](#) sitting in his room in the Armstrongs' residence, red rain still pouring down hard. Skeletal structures can be seen in the distance. Red veins have torn the asphalt apart. The television blares from the living room, the news anchor commenting about a corrupt doctor and the trafficking of organs.

Well. It's time to get to work.

*

"The Phantom Thief has stolen yet another heart, now exposing the defense attorney who has been forging evidence..."

A youth stands amongst the crowd, looking up at the giant screen mounted on a building in the middle of Valentine Hills. The red rain has come up to his chest now, and it's only been a week into his reign.

"A calling card has been sent..."

"A politician has confessed..."

The results of his pride and joy are shining through. He can hear very clearly the chattering of the people around him. They speak with unconcealed fear and concern, wondering whether they'd be next. They have a right to be afraid; everyone has distorted desires.

Dream ducks his head, hoodie casting a shadow on his and he turns his back to the big screen, walking back towards the train station.

He can't be late for school, after all.

~Fin~

Chapter End Notes

hope you enjoyed ur ending :)

Strife and Suffering

Chapter Summary

"strife and suffering"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

12/24 – THURSDAY – DAYTIME

“Interesting.” Yaldabaoth laughs, his cackle sending chills down Dream’s spine. “You would rather forsake glory for strife!”

“The Trickster will not bow to the likes of you!” Lavenza huffs.

Without warning, Yaldabaoth vanishes in a shroud of black, his last words echoing in the Velvet Room.

“How amusing, Trickster, but you must learn that you can never hope to stop me, for I am a god, and you are a mere mortal.”

Dream shoves his hands into his pockets. He made the right choice. He’s sure of that.

A flash of light catches his attention, and Dream realizes what’s changed the same time Lavenza does. A figure is slumped on the table, his face so recognisable.

“Master!” Lavenza cries, racing over and shaking Igor’s arm.

Igor is roused from unconsciousness. He sits up straight, exhibiting the elegance and dignity that Yaldabaoth had managed to capture well.

“Trickster,” Igor says, recognition dawning on his face. Dream has *got* to get used to this scratchier voice of the real Igor’s. “I see that you have survived your ordeals.”

“Indeed he has,” Lavenza says. “His tenacity and willpower ought to be praised.”

Igor opens his mouth to speak again, but Dream cuts him off. “Sorry to interrupt, but where are my friends?”

Igor pauses, before smiling that same smile. “Having suffered the same fate as yourself, they must have ended up somewhere in this room. Perhaps you will be able to ignite their fighting spirit once more.”

Igor does not get a chance to finish because Dream sprints off towards the first corridor he finds, taking cautious steps down a dark hallway, walls padded with blue velvet. He does not need to walk long before he comes across a jail cell, a familiar friend standing within.

“Nick!” Dream wraps his fingers around the iron bar of the cell door. Nick’s back is to the wall, arms folded, staring at the velvet. He raises his head when Dream arrives.

“Clay? You’re here too?” Dream has never heard Nick sound this dejected. It stirs up an uncomfortable feeling in the pits of his stomach. “Where are we?”

“The...The Velvet Room,” Dream says, not quite sure how to explain its existence to Nick. Nick doesn’t seem to mind, though

“Pretty pathetic, don’t you think?” Nick asks with a bitter laugh. “We were so pumped to save the world, then the public ended up forgetting about us.” He looks up at the ceiling. “We were forgotten by the people we wanted to save.”

“Then we just have to make them remember,” Dream says. “Simple as that.”

“But you know, these are the same people who cheered for us to help them, and now you’re telling me that they didn’t care one bit? That they’d rather things stay like how it was?” Nick sighs.

“I’m sure that isn’t true.”

Nick chuckles, meeting Dream’s eyes. “You’re so tough.”

“So are you.”

“Oh, don’t give me that. I started this whole Phantom Thief thing because I was mad. Mad at Krones. Mad at the world for taking Neil away like that,” Nick says. He closes his eyes. “Maybe continuing was just...it’s just because I was selfish, that I wanted to punish the people who do to other people what society did to Neil. I wanted to punish people my mom couldn’t. I just wanted... Maybe I continued this whole Phantom Thief business because I wanted proof of my defiance of society.”

[“And](#) what’s wrong with that?” Dream challenges. “There are people out there doing bad things to other people. What’s wrong with wanting them to reform?”

Nick stares, wide-eyed, as if Dream’s brought about a realization in him that he’s never had before. He smiles.

“Yeah, you’re right.” Behind those eyes burns a fire of passion stronger than ever before. “Who cares what other people think? As long as we ourselves believe in our ideals, then we’ve got something to fight for.”

The door to Nick’s jail cell snaps open, dissolving into blue butterflies. A soft glow surrounds Nick, and his outfit transforms into that of his Phantom Thief costume, the ends of his bandana falling past his shoulders.

[“Right](#) then,” Sappap says. “We’ve got work to do. Where are the others?”

“Somewhere here,” Dream says. “Want to come with?”

“I think I’ll just wait here. I think you should go have a heart-to-heart with them, you know. I’d feel bad for intruding.”

Dream nods. He guides Sappap back to the circular room where Lavenza and Igor waits, then sets off to find the others.

*

“Hey.”

Darryl looks up from where he's seated on the ground, knees pulled up to his chest.

"Oh, hi, Clay." The false cheer in his voice is extremely saddening. It's unusual for Darryl to not be a shining ball of positivity. Dream has to set that right immediately. "Where are we?"

"The Velvet Room," Dream says.

Darryl gives him a quizzical look but decides not to question it further. He stares back at the ground.

"Why did those people...why couldn't they see what was happening?" Darryl asks, voice small. "Those weird things that came up from the ground, the red rain..."

"They just..." There's no way to give it to Darryl straight. "They just didn't believe in us anymore."

"Really?" Darryl hums, eyes still on the ground. "What's the point of doing this anymore if no one believes in us? Clay, I don't think I can do this anymore. It's...The pressure is..." He snuffles, fingers tightening on his kneecaps.

"Darryl, do you remember what you promised Adrian?"

"Adrian? What does he have to do with this?"

["You"](#) wanted to be strong for him, right?" Dream says. "You wanted to show him your strength."

"Y-Yeah?"

"Even if it's just one person, don't you think it's worth it to put in the effort to fight?" Dream asks. Darryl nods, wiping away the stray tears at the corner of his eyes.

"Then show him your strength. We're all here for you too," Dream says.

Darryl stands, a watery laugh escaping his lips. "Thanks for cheering me up. I know what I have to do now."

The door of Darryl's jail cell breaks open, dissolving into blue butterflies. His clothes morph into that of his Phantom Thief outfit, complete with his black hoodie, hem lined with red, draped over his shoulder.

"Thanks," Bad says. "No giving up this time."

[Dream](#) offers him a smile and sends him Sapnap's way. He heads off to search for the other Thieves...

*

"What are you doing here?"

Dream shrugs. "It's a place I'm familiar with."

"Familiar? This place? You're weirder than me and that's saying something."

Ouch.

Zak is sitting on the lone stool in a corner of the room, staring at the wall opposite him, not really

seeing.

“What’s up?” Dream asks.

“Great. Absolutely amazing,” Zak says, turning to face him. “Feels like I’m a magician who just pulled a vanishing act.”

Dream chuckles. “Yeah, we did. We disappeared right in front of so many people and no one suspected a thing.”

Zak laughs hollowly.

“You can...you know you can be sad if you need to be,” Dream says, leaning against the cell’s door. “You don’t have to be happy all the time.”

“But this is all I have,” Zak says with a frustrated sigh. Dream can already see the cracks in his armour, splintering and peeling away and revealing the basest form of his soul. “But honestly? I’m angry. Angry and mad and furious.”

Dream chuckles. “That’s all the same thing. But you know what?”

“What?” Zak peers up at him questioningly.

[“It’s](#) okay to let that out once in a while, as long as you’re not hurting anyone else,” Dream says. “It’s not good to bottle it in all the time.”

Zak laughs, a freer sound. “Let it out, huh? Can I beat up some Shadows?”

“Sure. Shadows aren’t really...people after all.”

Zak grins, and the door to his cell bursts open. He begins to glow, and his clothes transform once more clad in that cyan bodysuit, his mask appearing over his face. Skeppy steps out of the cell, beaming.

[“Alright.](#) We need to kick some butts. Where are the others?”

Dream gives him directions to the chamber where Sapnap and Bad should be and proceeds to search for the rest.

*

“Clay?”

Dream walks up to the next cell, where Eret is sitting on the lumpy mattress not dissimilar to the one in Dream’s own cell. Upon noticing Dream’s presence, he walks over to the cell door.

“Where is this place?” Eret asks.

“The Velvet Room,” Dream says automatically.

“Oh, is that so?” Eret leans back against the wall, eyes on the ground. “What a strange place...” He trails off into a pitiful chuckle. “This is utterly pathetic.”

“Why do you say that?”

“We strove to prove our justice to society, to aid them in their time of need, yet we were forsaken

when we needed them the most,” Eret says, shaking his head. “That is most possibly the truest form of betrayal.”

“Maybe,” Dream says, “but why do we need the public’s approval to do anything?”

“Because our very existence hinges on their cognition, Clay,” Eret says slowly. “It’s...If they don’t believe we exist, then we cannot exist. Simple as that.”

“Not necessarily,” Dream says. “We just have to prove to them that we exist. You remember what happened in Valentine’s, right?” Eret nods. “They need us more than ever now, Eret.”

[Eret](#) hangs his head, a smile spreading across his face. “A true leader serves his people to the best of their abilities, especially when times are dire, even when their people do not believe in them...”

“Right,” Dream says, nodding.

“And that’s exactly why I cannot stop fighting here either,” Eret says. The moment those words leave his mouth, the door to his cell breaks open and his outfit changes. He is dressed once more in his armoured black suit, headset-like mask settling over his eyes.

[“Thanks](#) for opening my eyes,” Eret says. He glances around. “Still, where are the others?”

Dream guides him to the round chamber where the rest of the Thieves wait and he sets off in search of the others.

*

“Hey.”

Harvey is pacing restlessly, fingers clasped behind his back. He walks over to the cell door at Dream’s approach.

“What are we doing here? Where is this?”

“The Velvet Room. And, uh, if you remember, our existence was erased,” Dream says. “Are you doing okay?”

“Like you said, feeling pretty non-existent, but I’m okay,” Harvey says. “Nothing much to do here, though. I think I’d go crazy after a while.” He dips his head, knuckles white around the bars of his door. “That said, I’ve got a question for you.”

“And what’s that?”

“What are we fighting for?” Harvey asks. “Like, if no one’s gonna care if the biggest politician in the country has confessed to his crimes, then no one’s gonna care about us, ever.”

“What about your father’s dignity? Isn’t that a reason for you to fight too?”

“My father’s...dignity?” Harvey raises a brow.

“You wanted to build Lee Foods back up again, didn’t you?” Dream says, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. “If the world out there turns to shit, how’d you be able to do that, then?”

[Harvey](#) stares, stunned, for a couple of seconds, before throwing his head back and laughing heartily.

“I can’t believe I forgot something so important,” Harvey says. “If we don’t save the world from whatever...whatever that cup thing was, then there won’t be anyone to build Lee Foods up for.”

At that, the door to Harvey’s cell shatters, and he steps out dressed in his Phantom Thief garb, the contrasting orange and green that has never been so welcoming.

[“Thanks](#) for helping me remember,” Harvey says, hands on his hips, looking especially comfortable. “Where are Sapnap and the others?”

Dream directs him to the room where the rest should be waiting. Harvey waves a quick goodbye, leaving Dream to seek out the final member of the Thieves.

*

“This is a strange place,” Blade says as Dream approaches. “Though you seem very at home here.”

“You got me,” Dream says, holding up his hands. “This is the Velvet Room.”

“The Velvet Room?” Blade touches his chin. “The room featured in Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Masque of the Red Death’. Of the seven rooms that represent life, this is the last one before death.”

Dream stares at him. Blade laughs.

“Anyway, why are we here? Something tells me we’re on death’s door.”

“No, no,” Dream says with a breathy chuckle. “We’re not.”

“So it all comes down to cognition, huh,” Blade says, sighing. “Just disappearing like that means we must have disappeared from everyone’s minds, and not gonna lie, that kinda sucks.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” Dream says.

“Yeah. It’s bringing me back to a long time ago, back when I opposed you guys. I wasn’t accepted no matter where I went.” Blade goes quiet. “It’s weird that I can just talk to you about this.”

“I’m fine with it. Don’t worry,” Dream says, waving dismissively. He meets Blade’s intense gaze. “And about that whole acceptance thing, are you just gonna let it slide?”

“Look, Clay, I’m done with that life, alright,” Blade mutters. “If people are just gonna ostracise me for having different ideals...”

[“You](#) have a place with us,” Dream says stubbornly. “We’re not going to shun you or anything.”

Blade bites his lip, contemplative. He ducks his head, shoulders shaking with a suppressed laugh.

“You’re absolutely right, now that I think about it,” Blade says. “Maybe that’s what made me continue in the first place.”

The door to Blade’s cell breaks, pieces scattering on the carpeted floor. He now dons his cape, kingly vest worn over a white button-down. His mask reappears on his face, shiny crown catching the gleam of the dim light.

[“If](#) I’m here, then the others must be too,” Techno says.

“Yeah,” Dream says. “But I haven’t found Fundy yet.”

However, Dream has reached the end of the corridor, and he has yet to find one of his dear friends. Where could Fundy be?

“Let’s meet up with the others first,” Techno says. “Maybe they found him already.”

Dream highly doubts it, but perhaps he’s missed a cell along the way. In any case, he makes his way back with Techno. Back to the room where it’s all started.

Chapter End Notes

good job! now it's time to defeat yaldabaoth and take the public's heart!

Judgement arcana rank 8 -> 9 (yaldabaoth)

The Gods' Game

Chapter Summary

the truth behind everything

Chapter Notes

shorter chap because it's kinda explanation heavy?

also, i wld like to wish tubbo a happy belated birthday :) i havent watched his bday stream yet but i will get around to doing it soon lol

explanation at the end if it's too confusing in the chap!

Aeon arcana rank 9 -> 10 MAX (lavenza)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

12/24 – THURSDAY – DAYTIME

“What the fuck?”

Tommy stares at the reddish puddle gathering on the ground. Tubbo glances around, almost crushing the crepe in his hands.

“What the fuck is this?”

“How is no one seeing this?” Tommy glares at the passers-by, blinking as a drop of red rain lands on his nose.

“I don’t know,” Tubbo mumbles.

*

Phil glances out the window of his shop, eyes widening when he notices a white bone-like structure protruding from the ground like a broken rib. Right outside his shop. He rushes out, only to bump into a girl in the Enderlands uniform.

She lands rear first onto the ground, splashing as she crashes into the puddles of crimson.

“Sorry, are you okay?” Phil asks, extending a hand and helping her up.

“I’m...I’m fine,” the girl says. She glances around. “About these...are you seeing these too?”

“Yeah,” Phil says, nodding. He gazes up at the sky, an arm over his eyes. Just what the heck is going on here?

*

“What?” Joel looks up to see red droplets showering from the skies. Without thinking, he dashes to the nearby shelter, the overhang of Jule Halls’ train station, plastic bags in his hand crinkling.

“What’s going on?” Joel looks around. Everyone else seems to be going about their day naturally, as if they...they can’t see the rain at all. That’s just not possible.

“You too?”

Joel turns at the voice, noticing a girl hugging a basket of gardening equipment to her chest, apparently distraught at the rain of red as well.

“Yeah,” Joel says, swallowing thickly.

This is not natural. Definitely not.

*

“No way...” Phoenix SC peers up at the sky from where he’s mowing his lawn, squinting against the red rain. What the heck is this?

The phenomenon seems to have attracted the attention of a young man walking by his house with his friend.

“What the fuck? Are you seeing this, big Q?”

“Seeing what? I’m not seeing anything, Wilbur.”

The young man named Wilbur stares at his friend, Big Q, stunned. “Don’t you see the blood?”

“Blood? Are you trying to scare me again?”

“Can you really not see it?”

Phoenix SC glances down at his lawn, slowly filling with red-tinged water. So it doesn’t seem like everyone can see it...

*

“Whoa? What the heck?” Gina yelps, jaw dropped at the bone that has just risen from the ground, jutting out in front of their path. Mrs Armstrong stops in her tracks, focused on that strange occurrence as well.

“Molly? Gina?” Mr Armstrong walks right through it, turning around to look at them. Just like the other park-goers, he doesn’t seem to have noticed its presence, which is more than concerning, considering its sheer size.

“Oh my God!”

A woman passing by nearly stumbles as another bone appears in front of her, pulsing red vines twined around it like Christmas holly.

“Are you alright?” Mr Armstrong asks, walking over and helping her up. The woman nods.

Gina, however, can hardly bring herself to tear her eyes away from that abomination. Wherever the Thieves are, she hopes they’re doing alright...

[“Hey!”](#)

Sapnap raises a hand in greeting as Dream enters the chamber with Techno in tow. Dream’s eyes fall on a familiar figure standing by Lavenza’s side, clad in his usual black jacket and cap.

“Fundy!” Dream runs over.

“Glad to see you were worried about me, Dream,” Fundy says. “Ever so glad.”

“How did you...where were you?” Dream tilts his head. “And why are you glowing?”

At first, Dream just thought that it is the sheen of Fundy’s fur glimmering under the light of the Velvet Room. However, now that he has taken a closer look, he’s realized that Fundy is, indeed, glowing. Tiny spheres of light reminiscent of fireflies flitting about in the summer fields flicker as he moves.

“You know how I didn’t remember who I was? Well, I remember them all now,” Fundy says.

“You remember who you are?” TapL asks.

“Yeah,” Fundy says, folding his paws. “I was born here, in the Velvet Room.”

“What?” Dream’s gaze darts from Lavenza to Igor. “Is this true?”

Lavenza nods. “Our Master initially created Fundy to guide the Trickster through the Metaverse, to dispel an evil being that had invaded man’s spiritual world.”

“So this evil being is...the Holy Grail?” Eret asks, arms folded.

Fundy hums. “It’s actually the god of control, but they’re the same thing, honestly. Right before the Velvet Room was about to be taken over, my Master gathered the last traces of mankind’s hope and made me.”

“Yaldabaoth is trying to force all of man into eternal servitude,” Lavenza says. “It wishes to attain everlasting peace by filling reality with people who have opted to stop thinking for themselves.”

“Wait, so the Holy Grail isn’t a Treasure?” TapL asks.

“It is. In fact, it is the core of Mementos itself,” Lavenza explains. “The Treasure desires to rule over man, and thus gained a will of its own.”

“I have no idea what the heck’s happening,” Skeppy mutters.

“Our Master wasn’t willing to let that slide,” Fundy continues. “He and the god pitted two individuals with great potential against each other to decide the fate of the world.”

“The first was the boy named George,” Lavenza says. “He was to incite the distortion of the masses by allowing Singh to become President, and had he won, the world would have been destroyed and remade.”

“And the other was...me?” Dream asks, gesturing to himself.

“So that’s where your wild card powers came from...” Bad mumbles, biting his nail.

“Yes,” Lavenza says. “If Clay won, then the world would have been left as it is. At least, that is how the game was supposed to have gone.”

“You mean something happened?” Techno asks.

Lavenza nods. “The god knew that a revolution will not occur within indolent individuals. It was the masses’ distorted desires incarnate, after all. However, our true Master believed in the power of the people and believed that the Trickster could rise up among the people and accomplish this change.”

Such an elaborate game had been going on behind his back, and Dream was hardly aware of it. Hell, he hadn’t even remotely suspected that something on so large a scale had been happening without his knowledge.

“The god laughed at the prospect and sought to prove man’s powerlessness with the game. It helped to train the Trickster, only to cast him into despair, using the masses who had rejected their saviour.”

Not just the masses, Dream thinks, scuffing his heels against the ground. There had been one other as well who had managed to stir up such strong emotions within him...

Lavenza clutches her book to her chest. “Now that I think about it, I had been reluctant to use the word ‘rehabilitation’. It had only been a ruse to keep you under his surveillance...”

Dream had been a puppet this whole time, both he and George. George probably hadn’t known and never will.

“Long story short, Dream was involved in a game where the god rigged the outcome,” Fundy says.

“Now, the world is merging with Mementos, replete with the cognition of people who reject your existence,” Lavenza says, brows furrowed. “It is precisely because of that that you do not exist in this current world.”

“But you guys...you guys can do something, right?” Sarnap asks.

Lavenza shakes her head. “Having just been released from the god’s clutches, my Master and I are very weak. During the time we need to recover to our fullest strength, it is likely that the god would have followed through on his ideal world and have fused it with Mementos.”

“From which, there is no separating them anymore,” Igor says sternly. Dream really *has* to get used to that squeakier voice of the real one.

[“What](#) if we just beat them up?” Techno asks. “If we kill the god, then he can’t take over the world.”

“You should have said so earlier,” Skeppy says, grabbing for his katana. “Let’s go slice some bitches up!”

“Language!” Bad hisses.

“What a lively bunch.” Lavenza chuckles. “Trickster, it is time for you to finish your rehabilitation. This time, it is to save the world.”

Dream nods. Their final mission – to steal the public’s heart.

“How many ‘last job’s have we had already?” Bad laughs.

“But stealing the public’s heart? That would look really good on my resume, if you ask me,” Eret says.

“Right then,” Dream says. His team is all raring to go, each burning with fierce determination to take down the evil god Yaldabaoth and to remove his influence from the world.

It’s time the right to think for themselves is returned to man. A stairway opens behind Igor, a large metallic door at the top of it. No doubt that that is their way out, to find the god and confront him.

“Let’s move out.”

Dream begins to climb the staircase, his fellow Thieves following right behind him.

Lavenza watches as he leaves and smiles to herself.

I am thou, thou art I. Thou hast turned a vow into a blood oath. Thy bond shall become the wings of rebellion and break the yoke of thy heart. Thou hast awakened to the ultimate secret of the Aeon, granting thee infinite power...

*

Chapter End Notes

- masses don't want to think for themselves - would rather security over freedom. this causes the holy grail to appear as their treasure and to create mementos which is everyone's palace and is the core of the metaverse. i.e. when mementos is destroyed, the metaverse disappears
- holy grail gains sentience and it wants to rule over the people that made it, to ensure that all mankind serves him by giving up their free will
- holy grail and Igor decide to pit 2 tricksters against each other: these 2 tricksters are Dream and George. depending on who won (who accomplishes their goal first), holy grail will either destroy the world and remake it or leave the world as it is.
- George's goal is to incite distortion amongst the masses by making Singh win the election, proving that if humanity worships such a warped figure, they are beyond saving. so if he won, holy grail will destroy and remake the world.
- Dream's goal is to incite a revolution amongst the masses by becoming a phantom thief and stealing the hearts of the people. if he manages to make enough people change their ways, then the world will be kept as it is.
- unfortunately the holy grail never intended to play by the rules. he kidnapped the real Igor and stashed him away in some faraway dimension and tore Lavenza into Justine and Caroline. this is to keep watch on both Dream and George
- the holy grail rigged the game by making Singh weirdly popular and forced the masses to be apathetic towards the election results. he also forced the masses to deny the thieves' existence, essentially making them disappear
- Dream has now overcome the grail's temptations and is now about to head out and confront Yaldabaoth!

Qliphoth World: Life Will Change

Chapter Summary

it's time to face yaldabaoth...kinda

Chapter Notes

sorry to burst your bubble but we're not fighting yaldabaoth yet lol

also merry christmas to everyone who's celebrating!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

12/24 – THURSDAY – DAYTIME

Dream grunts as he shoves the metal door open, stumbling out into the apocalyptic landscape of Valentine Hills, the other Thieves right behind him. He glances back at the room from which they had emerged, looking utterly similar to that special quarantine cell in the depths of Mementos...

"Wait, so the dangerous prisoner is..."

"Dream?" Techno shakes his head with a laugh. "You're the most dangerous prisoner in the Metaverse. How do you feel about that?"

Dream shrugs with a grin. "Pretty good."

"Whoa? What is this?" Skeppy glances around. "They can see us!"

Like what Skeppy said, there appears to be a crowd gathering around them, pointing and whispering about their strange getup. Rude much?

In any case, what the Thieves should be concerned about is the humongous structure that has popped up in front of them, like platforms made of vines embraced by those hideous veins. The shrine that they had found the Holy Grail in deep down in Mementos has now risen to the surface, its magnificence visible even from the other end of Valentine's.

In true Phantom Thieves' fashion, the team leaps from vine to vine, from branch to branch. Each cluster creaks under their weight but does not give way.

There are Shadows taking the form of robotic angels guarding the path to the Holy Grail. They don't have time to deal with so many. Dream shoots them in the face as soon as they get close, dashing past the resultant shrouds of ash whipped away by the wind.

They come to what appears to be a rounded arena, blocked by an angel all dolled up in a dress with intricate patterns, a sword in one hand, pristine white feathers rustling in the drafts.

"I am Uriel, the Herald of Death and a servant of Yaldabaoth. I cannot allow you to proceed any

further.” The angel stabs his sword in their direction, and Dream whips out his dagger, preparing for a battle, only for Skeppy to grab his arm and push him aside.

“Leave this guy to me and Bad,” he says, his katana at the ready. “You go on ahead! We’ll catch up later!”

Dream opens his mouth to protest but he catches himself. Perhaps it’s time to trust his teammates for once. He senses Uriel’s swing mere seconds before it happens, ducking before his head gets lobbed off. Bad’s thorny whip winds around Uriel’s arm, pulling it away from Dream.

He wears the scariest glare on his face, and Dream is so glad that Bad’s on their side. “Your fight’s with us.”

This gives Dream and the others the opening they need to rush on ahead. The next area consists of more twisted vines, with even more Shadows ready to attack. TapL launches a grenade into their ranks, blowing up most of the amorphous monsters without much of a struggle. Dream and the others pick off the survivors, running up the lengths of the vines as each Shadow falls at their feet.

They come to yet another large platform, their path once more obstructed by another angel. The angel’s golden hair shimmers in the diminishing sunlight, its blade glimmering, wings spread menacingly.

“Halt, mortals.” The angel holds out a hand. “I am Raphael, Cleanser of Heaven, and for the glory of my master, I will have to stop you he-“

Raphael doesn’t get to complete its sentence before it’s interrupted by a massive explosion. TapL drops his launcher and draws his axe.

“You...seriously talk to much,” Eret says, drawing his revolver. “Dream, TapL and I will handle things here.”

Dream nods, turning and dashing past the angel, headed up to the next area.

“Stop! I command you!” Raphael moves to fire a beam of energy at the advancing Thieves, only to be caged by a rain of arrows. It screams, whirling around, feathers rustling furiously. It doesn’t matter now, though, because Dream has already moved on.

The next area proves to be a little more problematic than he had anticipated. There are so many platforms just floating in the air, littered with mechanical angel-like Shadows that attack on sight.

Dream activates his grappling hook, the hook grasping the edge of the nearest island. The wire retracts and Dream shoots upwards, soaring through the air and landing right in front of a Shadow.

He makes quick work of the Shadow with a dagger to its throat, slicing its head off. The Shadow dissolves into ash. Fundy lands beside him. Meanwhile, Sapnap and Techno have made it to another, higher platform, taking care of the Shadow there as well.

Together, side by side, they scale the levitating islands, exterminating Shadows that get in their way. When they reach the top of this area, however, all that’s waiting for them is another angel, this time holding a flower in hand.

“While you may have done well to have made it this far, I, Gabriel, the Declarer of Anguish, shall stop you here.”

“What the hell is it with you angels and your weird titles?” Techno mutters.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m ready to kick some ass,” Sapnap says, cracking his knuckles. “Dream, you and Fundy go on first. We’ll catch up to you later.”

Wasting no time, Dream barrels past Gabriel. It snarls, conjuring a fireball and hurling it at the running duo. With a sharp crack of metal, the fireball is hurtled back at it, exploding in its face.

“Did you really think,” Techno says, with the barrel of his gun against the back of Gabriel’s head, “that you’d be able to get to them so easily?”

Dream doesn’t hear what happens after that, because he’s already soaring through the air with Fundy on his shoulder, the two of them making for the shrine at the end of the road, which is just...up ahead...

“Whoa!”

A sudden gust of wind nearly blows them off the platform they’ve just landed on. A beam of light pools in the middle of the island and an angel descends from the above. Like the last few angels, it wields a long, formidable blade, but this time it burns with a golden aura, a serene expression on its face.

Dream prepares himself. This angel is the final obstacle that he has to clear before he can reach the shrine.

“I see you have abandoned your comrades,” the angel says, voice filled with contempt. Dream opens his mouth to speak, but the angel continues before he can. “Well, it is no matter, for it makes it all the easier to crush you!”

“Dream! Look out!” Fundy summons a wall of wind, blocking the first shockwave the angel casts towards them. Dream follows up with a barrage of pink spheres cutting through the wind barrier. The angel dodges most of them, taking only the unavoidable hits.

The angel calls upon the will of the heavens, the clapping of thunder splitting the sky, raining lightning bolts on the platform where they stand. Dream swaps to Dionysus as soon as the first bolt strikes him, and the sparks bounce off his skin as if by magic.

Fundy screams, and Dream whips his head around. The lightning storm has stopped, but Fundy lays on the ground, fur sizzling. Dream dashes over, swapping to Lakshmi. He scoops Fundy up in his arms, enveloping the both of them in a flood of green light.

Fundy coughs, whiskers twitching. Dream glances back, throwing up a shield cloaked in blue, narrowly deflecting the fireballs thrown their way. The shield shatters. Fundy leaps onto Dream’s shoulder.

“I’m gonna give us a boost, and we’re going to go all out on him, alright?”

Dream agrees, drawing his pistol. Fundy waits till the angel comes at them with its sword before launching them into the air with a tornado beneath their feet. Dream tumbles, pistol in hand, blasting as many holes as he can into the angel’s torso.

The angel screeches, ichor spurting from its wounds and it veers around, switching its sword out for a bow and arrows of light, similar to the ones Eret uses.

Dream swaps to Sraosha just as the arrow pierces his chest, the projectile fizzling away uselessly. He lifts his pistol in time to block the angel’s swing of its sword. With its attention on Dream, the angel has left its back completely unprotected.

The angel's stomach is sliced to ribbons as Fundy's wind scythes twirl and spin like shuriken. The angel screams and falls to the ground. Dream presses the barrel of his pistol to its head.

"Any last words?" he says.

The angel can hardly speak, ichor gurgling in its mouth. Without hesitation, Dream puts a hole through its head, the angel bursting into dust.

"Hey!"

Dream turns on his heels, noticing several other figures running up to him. He holsters his pistol and flashes them a smile. Covered in black and crimson blood alike, injuries galore, are the Phantom Thieves, but they're glowing with triumph.

"You're still alive," Dream says.

"No shit. We can't let you hog all the glory to yourself." Sappap grins.

Dream turns back to face the shrine that stands ever so tall, towering over even the skyscrapers of Valentine's. It's surrounded by a scarlet gale, whipping about the shrieks of people below. Dream glances down at the crowd – at this height, they look like ants – running about and screaming. Could it be that they can finally see the madness happening around them?

In that case, they'd better put a stop to this as fast as they can. The ground upon which the shrine stands is disconnected from the island they are on. Dream digs a black orb from his pocket and hurls it, landing safely on the other side.

With his Thieves beside him, Dream makes his way down the staircase spiralling down the sides of the shrine's walls, heading deeper and deeper to where the Holy Grail resides.

*

"When will you learn?"

Dream walks up to the Holy Grail, its golden sheen as bright as ever, the clusters of veins coiled around its surface still pulsing erratically, pumping what must be the distorted desires of so many people.

"Learn what?" Dream asks defiantly.

The Holy Grail sighs. "I offered you a place to rule beside me. Had you accepted my offer, you would have been promised fame beyond your wildest imagination."

"You're mistaken," Dream says, shaking his head. "I'm not in this Phantom Thief business to get recognized."

"All we want to do is to save people," Eret says. "To save people who couldn't stand up for themselves."

"We may have lost sight of our goal once, but we won't now. Not anymore," Bad continues.

"And that's why we've got to take you down," Fundy says as a matter-of-factly.

The Holy Grail cackles. "Interesting. Come at me if you can, Phantom Thieves."

Shadows begin to gather, trickling in from the cracks in the walls, emerging from the ground.

[“Fundy, Sapnap, Techno, with me! Everyone else take care of the Shadows!”](#)

The team splits into formation as the Holy Grail initiates the first assault. A beam of white is fired from the diamond embedded on it, searing the ground where Dream once stood. Dream leaps high, summoning Black Frost and casting a flurry of icicle spears.

The spears chip at the cup, clinking and shattering upon impact. The veins begin to pulsate with an ominous scarlet. The Holy Grail shimmers, the topaz beside the diamond glowing and activating its power. Instantly, whatever damage the Thieves had inflicted on the cup begins to close. It’s healing itself again.

“Dream,” Fundy says, “we gotta cut the...those veins on top.”

The veins that Fundy refers to is the hilum of the cup where all the vessels are gathered, delivering sustenance to the Holy Grail. If they sever the veins, then they should be able to prevent the Holy Grail from recovering from the damage.

“Alright, but it has to be discreet,” Dream says. Who should he send? Sapnap’s weapon clearly isn’t made for such a job. Fundy’s in charge of damage control...

“Techno!” Dream shouts, gesturing at the veins. Techno gets the hint, summoning Anat with a flick of his hand. Anat soars into the air, leaving a trail of cyan behind it.

Fundy and Sapnap send a raging thunderstorm at the Holy Grail, battering its golden body, keeping it distracted. White beams of light pierce the ground, forcing each of the battling Thieves to remain on the move. Dream hurls a barrage of light spheres its way, each one countered with a blast of white.

A glint catches Dream’s eyes and he can hardly wipe the smirk off his face when he sees the familiar swipe of cyan, Techno’s light sabre slashing through the veins, tearing them apart like a predator does to its prey. The veins shrivel and curl in on themselves, its bright red now a diluted maroon.

“What?” The shock in its voice is undeniable. “When did you...?”

“Now we’re back to a fair fight,” Dream says.

“Imbeciles!” the Holy Grail growls. “How dare you defy me?”

“Without the Shadows, he’s got nothing on us!” Fundy shouts, summoning Mercurius and whipping up twin cyclones. Dream swaps from Sraosha to Dionysus, bolstering Sapnap’s electricity with his own. The thunderstorm grows, consuming everything in its path and crashing into the Holy Grail just as Techno lands behind them, rolling on the ground.

The Holy Grail shrieks, the demonic sound piercing Dream’s eardrums. The lesser Shadows burst into dust. The ground rumbles, forcing Dream to one knee. The walls of the shrine crumble and fall away, revealing the town beneath them...

No, the walls aren’t falling away. They are the ones rising into the sky, above the clouds, the cold seeping into their bones as they rise higher and higher and higher, till the city beneath them is naught but a cluster of shapes.

“What the hell...” Eret mutters.

Dream opens his mouth to comment, only snapping his jaw shut when a shadow looms over them.

He follows the gaze of the rest of his Thieves, going stiff when he realizes just what he's looking at.

For once, perhaps Dream thinks that they've bitten off more than they can chew.

What stands, or rather, *floats* before them is none other than a gargantuan angel, or a god, covered from head to toe in steel. Steel that shimmers in the abundant sunlight, an intricate design of a dragon as black as obsidian, violet eyes glaring down at them inscribed upon it. A metal halo sits atop its head, complementing its wings composed of glinting feathers. It towers over them, bigger than any being that Dream has ever seen.

How are they going to-

Dream catches himself. It has never been a matter of *how* they're going to fight this thing. It's a matter of *how long* they're going to take to destroy this literal god, because they've got a Christmas Eve dinner to get back to. Wouldn't want to keep Gina and the others waiting.

Dream draws his dagger. He hears the sing of blades, the clinking of iron as the other Thieves draw their weapons as well. Yaldabaoth chuckles. A shiver crawls up Dream's spine as a draft blusters past them, their cloaks fluttering in the wind.

"You are mere mortals," Yaldabaoth taunts, "yet you dare to fight a god?"

"So what?" Dream says. "You may be a god, but we're still going to rid the world of you."

"We'll save everyone from you and your damn control," Sapnap vows.

"You can't just take free will from humans like that," Bad says, shaking his head. "That's all wrong."

"Everyone has the right to think for themselves!" Skeppy shouts. "Who are you to say that we can't?"

"A leader of the people is their servant," Eret says. "You're no leader. You're just a tyrant who wants to lord over everyone you deem lower than them. And that's not okay."

"How many lives do you want to take to fulfil your selfish goals?" TapL grips his axe tightly. "How many people's lives must you destroy before you're satisfied?"

"Honestly, you're just an orphan throwing a tantrum," Techno says with a smirk. "So just stop talking and die."

"Humans aren't weak. Not the humans I've believed my whole life," Fundy cries. "Every time they fall down, they'll stand back up and rise ever stronger."

Dream stabs a finger in Yaldabaoth's direction. "We're going to defeat you and steal the people's heart, if you don't mind!"

Yaldabaoth laughs, spreading its arms wide, as if waiting for an embrace. Dream squares his shoulders.

"If that is what you intend, then I will crush you like the insignificant insects that you are!"

Chapter End Notes

Judgement arcana rank 9 -> 10 MAX (yaldabaoth)

Justice arcana rank 2 -> 6 (Tricksters of Justice)

Yaldabaoth

Chapter Summary

yaldabaoth fight

Chapter Notes

yaldy fight!

new manhunt spoilers:

i thought that lava fight was pretty darn epic. AND ANTFROST AT THE END THO

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

12/24 – THURSDAY – EVENING

Dream grunts as he's hurled back, back smashing against the ground. He winces and grasps at his arm, which he's sure is broken, what with the protruding bone. With a touch of Diarahan, he leaps to his feet, ready to rejoin the fray.

Yaldabaoth proves to be a formidable opponent, armed with an arsenal of weapons, including a sword, a gun, a book and a bell. Each weapon is sentient, possessing a will of its own.

"I release upon you the deadly sin of lust. You have no means of escape, humans. The insanity of mankind shall bring forth the demise."

"Eret!"

Bad pushes Eret out of the way of an incoming bullet. The shell explodes, its blast tossing anyone nearby into the air.

"Bad!" Fundy rushes over, healing magic at the ready. Bad is curled up on the ground in a foetal position, breaths quick and short, skin tinged with a purplish hue. Wisps of green curls around Bad's body, knitting his wounds shut, but it does not halt the rapid spread of the violet.

"Bad!" Skeppy is the next one by his side, gathering him into his arms.

Is that an effect of the bullet?

"Skeppy, Fundy! Protect Bad! Everyone else go on the offensive!" If the gun manages to incapacitate more of them, then that would be a massive problem. Dream's eyes widen as Yaldabaoth shakes with laughter. He stumbles as he slides off Yaldabaoth's back, tumbling

through the air with absolutely no time to react.

Dream barely registers the whirr of machinery when he lands back first into the back seat of a plane. The plane soars through the air, and Techno fires off several spheres of cyan that home in on Yaldabaoth's gun only for the gun to erect a shield, hurtling the spheres back at them.

Techno veers, swerves and nosedives, leaving Dream clinging onto Anat's sides with a death grip. The cyan bullets fly by them, narrowly missing them. Dream notices that the Bad, Skeppy and Fundy trio are missing from the platform – they've probably re-entered the battle. That means that whatever ailment that is, it doesn't last long.

Techno gasps as the sword appears out of nowhere, slamming into Anat with such force that Anat shatters, disappearing into blue sparkles. Dream and Techno plunge from the skies, crashing painfully on the floating platform.

"Are you okay?" Skeppy drops from where he's been conjuring hailstorms against the sword, running over to them.

"I release upon you the deadly sin of vanity. You have no means of escape, humans. The fraudulence of mankind shall bring forth ruin..."

Dream shoves his fingers into his ears, gritting his teeth as the bell chimes, soundwaves rattling his bones, gnawing at him from the inside out. When he next opens his eyes, only a black figure greets him, dripping with what appears to be goo.

"What the heck?" Skeppy looks down at his hands, covered in the sludge. "What *is* this?"

"Don't take your eyes off the enemy!" Techno growls, throwing himself in front of them, lifting his light sabre against the incoming sword's slash. It's not possible to block something coming at you that's at least thirty times your size.

"Techno!"

A web of light catches Techno in mid-air, threads of light tangled in Eret's fingers. Heat from above has Dream glancing up, realizing that they're caught right underneath a barrage of flaming meteorites. Dream swaps to Black Frost, deflecting most fireballs back at Yaldabaoth.

"Crap!" Skeppy hisses, desperately drawing up a shield of ice, only for each shield to melt away as swiftly as he's throwing up. Dream swaps to Scathach, hissing as a fireball burns at his leg, and forms a forcefield around the both of them, reflecting off any fireballs falling from the sky.

Soon, the rain of fireballs cease, and Skeppy is now back to normal, no longer stained with the black substance.

"Are you alright?" Eret jumps down from Yaldabaoth's arm, Prometheus standing tall behind him as he bathes them in soothing, green light. Dream's skin repairs itself, the burn fading, the stench of gutted flesh disappearing from the air.

Yaldabaoth chuckles, even as TapL and Sapnap sever its arm which wields the gun, the gun breaking into a million shards.

"I release upon you the deadly sin of gluttony. You have no means of escape, humans. The selfishness of mankind shall bring forth ruin..."

The sword gleams with a dark light, and Dream throws up a hand as a wave of energy washes over

them. Is it just him, or is he feeling...*tired* all of a sudden? Summoning any Persona saps more energy from him.

Dream swaps out to Baal, conjuring up a storm that sweeps through the area, blades of wind slicing at Yaldabaoth's body. His vision blurs, ears ringing and he drops to his knees. The dizziness fades, and Dream staggers to his feet, aching muscles screaming at him.

What was that? Exhaustion washes over him like a tidal wave. Looking around, he realizes that perhaps the other Thieves seem to have been caught in the same predicament, their Personas flickering behind him, not drawn up to their full strength.

"I release upon you the deadly sin of wrath. You have no means of escape, humans. The passion of mankind shall bring forth ruin..."

The book in its unbroken arm begins to pulse with a viridian light before sepia bleeds into his vision, turning the world a sinister crimson. Voices begin to shout in his head, bouncing about in his brain, shrieking in his ears.

Kill him!

Dream draws his dagger, perspiration dripping from his chin.

He deserves death!

Dream rushes Yaldabaoth with a deranged cry, lips quirked up in a twisted grin, completely ignorant of the yells and shouts around him.

No matter what happens to you or your friends, you must kill him!

"Snap the fuck out of it!" Sappnap grabs Dream's arm and yanks him back before Dream falls off the edge of the platform. The red drains from his sight and the voices in his head go silent. Sappnap is panting, brows furrowed.

"What happened?" Dream asks, thrusting out a hand and summoning Scathach and surrounding himself and Sappnap with a barrier of blue, reflecting Yaldabaoth's spheres of pink back at it.

"Dunno. Must have been that book's power," Sappnap says, shrugging. He and Dream turn back to Yaldabaoth who has whipped out its gun again with a minatory brandish.

The gun hovers over them, a white beam charged up.

"I release upon you the deadly sin of greed. There is no means of escape, humans. The fixation of mankind shall bring forth ruin..."

The gun fires and the beam scorches the platform. Dream narrowly avoids the blast, squinting through the dust sprayed in their faces. Sappnap's knees buckle, his hand on Dream's shoulder dragging the latter down with him.

"Sappnap? What's wrong?"

Sappnap collapses, a hand on his stomach, face scrunched up in pain. It's not just him. TapL, a fair distance from them, is also experiencing the same thing, with Fundy attending to him.

"Fucking hell...my stomach hurts..." Sappnap gasps out, curling into himself. "Dream, you got... you got any food on you?"

Is that the gun's power? Hunger pangs? It did mention greed. Dream doesn't have any food stashed away...their only hope is to wait for it to wear off. However, in this state, Sappnap can't fight. Dream tenses as Yaldabaoth readies his ray of light again. He swaps his Persona out to Throne, fixing up a dome of fire around them.

The light pierces even the flames, puncturing Dream's arm. Blood oozes from the wound, dripping onto Sappnap's shirt. The pain comes all at once, and Dream bites his tongue so hard that he tastes metal. He swaps to Lakshmi, proceeding to heal that wound as swiftly as possible while the shield of fire fizzles away around them.

Sappnap recovers, picking himself up using his cudgel as support, looking even more pissed off than ever.

The book crashes to the ground beside them, shattering. Bad leaps from the arm that held the book, cruising down on a slide of fire. Dream looks back at Yaldabaoth as one of his arms regenerate, that bell with the horrible chime manifesting once more from thin air.

"I release upon you the deadly sin of envy. You have no means of escape, humans. The resentment of mankind shall bring forth ruin..."

The bell chimes and Dream covers his ears once more. He doesn't need to be blinded by rage like the last time. Fortunately, he does not appear affected when the bell's din echoes into nothingness.

A swish from beside him has Dream ducking on instinct. A swirl of green blades whizz by over his head, nicking off a lock of hair. What was that?

"Fundy? What's wrong with you?" TapL shouts, holding up his axe and blocking several wind blades.

"Watch out!" Eret dives in front of Dream and Sappnap and Prometheus looses an arrow. The arrow collides with a ball of fire, knocking it back to Bad who simply shrugs it off.

Dream recognizes that look in his eyes. He recognizes the symptoms all too well.

"They're under the god's control!" Dream shouts. "Restrain them!" It must have been the bell, casting that spell of envy upon them.

Cyan spheres rain from above, striking everyone on the platform. Dream whips out his pistol, hissing as he does his best to ignore the burn in his side. With three shots, he manages to strike Anat and Techno falls from the air, landing on the slope of Yaldabaoth's body.

"Dream!" Eret fires an arrow of light that pierces Yaldabaoth's body, right where Techno is struggling to keep from falling off. Dream activates his grappling hook, the wire coiling around the arrow. He leaps off the edge of the platform, swinging in a beautiful arc as the wire pulls taut, the arrow holding his weight.

Techno is no longer brainwashed. He meets Dream's gaze and holds out his hand just as he slips off the edge. Dream grabs his hand, fingers tightening around Techno's wrist and swinging upwards just as the wire snaps.

Oh crap.

"Here!"

Dream lands harshly on a solid, slippery surface, sliding down the ice slide back onto the platform safely, with Techno beside him already on his feet. Meanwhile, those who had been brainwashed have now been brought back to their senses.

It's like Yaldabaoth is playing with them, from the way he just stops attacking and watching them like a child toying with helpless ants when he inflicts them with one of the deadly sins.

God, this just pisses Dream off. He summons Kohryu, the dragon conjuring a storm laced with fuchsia and amethyst, ready to be launched at a moment's notice.

"I release upon you the deadly sin of pride. There is no means of escape, humans. The ingratitude of mankind shall bring forth ruin..."

Who cares anymore? The faster they take down Yaldabaoth, the fewer chances he'll have to torment them with these afflictions.

"Don't!" Fundy yells.

It's too late. Dream releases the storm, eyes widening when it crashes against an invisible shield. The storm blusters back at them, hurling them even further back towards the edge.

"What was that?" TapL adjusts the scarf around his neck.

"That book counters all attacks," Fundy says, nose high in the air. "But I think the shield's down now."

"Don't you see, mere mortals?" Yaldabaoth says. "Plagued with the sins of man, you cannot hope to defeat a perfect being such as I."

The design of the dragon on its breastplate glows brightly, an intimidating ball of dark energy converging where its mouth is.

"It's a big one." Eret squints at it, shoulders drawn up.

"And it's gonna hurt," Techno mutters.

Dream steels himself. They can't fail now. Not when they've come so far, not when the fate of the world is in their hands.

Moreover, he promised George that he'd take care of Gina. If he just lets Yaldabaoth walk all over them, it's essentially a betrayal of his wishes. Whatever else Yaldabaoth has in store for them, they're going to have to grit their teeth and plough through.

"It's coming! Brace yourselves!" Sapnap exclaims.

The dragon roars and the dark beams smoulders the platform upon which they stand.

For an instant, all Dream knows is agony. It's as if he's burning and frozen and zapped and sliced at all at the same time. Screams fill the air, ripped from their throats, bodies seizing, assaulted with a force so great that no normal person could take without going insane.

[The](#) pain ceases and Dream drops to the ground, muscles twitching, heart going a mile a minute. If not for the magic of the Metaverse, they probably won't be alive right now. The other Thieves aren't any better, each one of them panting, too exhausted and in pain to even lift a finger.

Dream watches as Yaldabaoth cackles, the dragon on its chest widening its jaw. If it manages to

get another one of those beams off...he isn't sure how long they can handle the assault.

Fundy is the first to rise, fangs bared, paws struggling to hold his own weight.

"If you were really a god, then you should be guiding humans towards your ideals!" Fundy shouts. "You're only destroying them because you can't do that!"

"You're trying...to flaunt your own existence," Eret says. "You were observing the masses because their reaction worried you."

"Such insolence," Yaldabaoth huffs. The dragon on its breastplate bellows, sending a ball of magic at the platform, striking the Thieves down again.

"Do you...want to erase us from existence so much?" TapL is breathless, arms trembling as he props himself up.

"Since you're forsaken by the world, there is nowhere you can belong," Yaldabaoth says. He charges up again, the giant sphere of darkness gyrating, black light splashing upon them. "Not even one sliver of unpredictability can be permitted under my control."

Dream convulses as he is struck down again by the rays of control, heart slamming in his ribcage, pulse going a mile a minute. His limbs are as heavy as lead, body drenched in sweat. Yaldabaoth is but a mere blur of silver and black and red.

A grating sound enters his ears, like that of chalk on a board. Unfortunately, Dream does not have the physical capabilities to even cover his ears.

"It was impossible after all..."

"They should never have gone up against a god..."

"They're idiots for thinking they could ever win..."

"Do you hear that?" Yaldabaoth mocks. "These are the voices of the masses you want to save so desperately. Humans are but clumps of desire. Logic dictates that a world filled with them will eventually decline."

Yaldabaoth fires yet another ball of magic at them, sending shockwaves of pain through the Thieves. Dream's voice has gone hoarse, his lungs about to collapse upon themselves.

There's no way they can beat Yaldabaoth. They've bitten off way more than they can chew. Their victory is merely wishful thinking. Those despairing thoughts run through Dream's head as he squints up at Yaldabaoth. One more ray of control and they're goners.

"Treason against a god is a severe offence punishable by everlasting pain..." Yaldabaoth trails off, letting the full implications of his words catch up with them.

"I'm not...I'm not letting that happen!" Fundy drags himself to his feet once more, swaying where he stands.

"An attendant created from the dregs of human hope, hmm?" Yaldabaoth sounds bored now, as if he's gotten tired of his playthings. "A pitiful existence like yourself cannot hope to overrule my precedent."

"Human hope is a desire too, and don't you dare underestimate it!" Fundy straightens his back, tail

high up in the air. “The Phantom Thieves will fight to the end! Even if only one of us is still standing, we’ll still stand up and fight!”

“Fools!” Yaldabaoth snarls. He’s not amused anymore, but rather annoyed beyond comprehension. “You dare measure your pitiful ‘hope’ against my power?”

“No shit!” Sappap pulls himself to his feet, grasping his cudgel tightly as he tries to stand upright.

“Fundy’s right! We’re never going to let you take over the human race!” Bad cries.

One by one, the Phantom Thieves stand up again, each one beaten and battered, but Dream can see the courage in their stances, in their spirits, manifesting as their Personas. Weak, but getting stronger and more solid. Dream pushes himself up, nearly toppling when his legs scream in protest.

Fundy jabs a paw at Yaldabaoth, shining fur glowing even brighter.

“We’ll definitely...we’ll definitely take the world!”

*

[What’s](#) happening? Yao Yi glances around, on the verge of hyperventilating. The world is on the brink of an apocalypse. People are vanishing left and right, leaving behind nothing but a cloud of black. There are weird bones scattered everywhere, protruding from the ground and stretching as high as the tallest skyscraper in Valentine Hills.

The sky is an ominous crimson, the red rain never ceasing. The accumulated water sloshes against her calves as she pushes her way through the flood to the base of the platforms made of vines, where most of the supernatural stuff seems to be happening, where most of the crowd seems to have gathered.

“We’ll definitely...we’ll definitely take the world!”

Yao Yi stares up at the large television screen mounted on a looming skyscraper, depicting the familiar logo of the Phantom Thieves buzzing with static.

The panicking people around her seem to have heard those words as well. Some are still running around like headless chickens, but most of them have directed their attention to the crackling screen.

“The Phantom Thieves? Can they really do anything in a situation like this?” a man mutters.

“Who are they again?”

“They haven’t given up yet?”

Yao Yi clenches her fists. How? How can their belief in their saviours waver so easily like this? If the people have lost their way...if the people have forgotten about them...then it’s up to those who believe to remind them. To remind them of what the Phantom Thieves have done, to inspire their hope once more and to recall the contributions the Thieves have made.

Cupping her mouth with one hand, the other a fist in the air, Yao Yi screams at the top of her lungs. She has to capture the attention of everyone around her. If the Phantom Thieves are still fighting, if they are still resisting with all their might against whatever strange force that has wreaked havoc on their home, then the least they can do is to stand strong. Send them the power of their support, no matter how insignificant it may be.

[Phantom](#) Thieves! You have to fight!”

Yao Yi’s voice tears through the silence ringing in the streets. She pumps her fist once more.

“Phantom Thieves! We support you!” she yells once more.

Still nothing from the people. Not until...

“Big man! You can beat his ass!”

Yao Yi turns her head, eyes widening as she watches two boys following her example, hollering with all that they have.

“Yeah! You get them!” A woman in uniform shouts, eyes trained on the screen.

Slowly but surely, more and more people begin to step forward, encouragements pouring from their mouths like water from a stream. Motivated, Yao Yi turns back to the screen, to the sky.

Their voices have got to reach them. They’ve got to reach Dream and his friends.

The Phantom Thieves who will save their world.

*

[Dream](#) hears them.

“Go! Phantom Thieves!”

“You can do it!”

“Please win!”

Those voices...Are they...?

“Hear that?” Sappnap spits a dollop of blood onto the platform. “Those are the voices of the humans you’ve made fun of!”

“No one wants you to rule over them!” Skeppy huffs.

“We won’t let ourselves get erased!” TapL heaves his axe upon his shoulders with a grunt.

“These are useless efforts,” Yaldabaoth says, the irritation growing in his tone. “God is the one who creates the world. I am the one fit to rule it!”

“Oh my God,” Techno mumbles. “Here comes his monologue again.”

“I’ve decided,” Fundy says, drawing his sabre, the sword twice his size clanking to the ground. He barely possesses the power to wield it anymore, but Fundy is still holding on. “I’m going to see my justice through to the end, for the sake of protecting what I care about.”

Fundy turns back to them, tail swishing. “If you’ve decided to take the world from him, don’t compromise your ideals to the very end!”

Dream stabs a finger in Yaldabaoth’s direction, a tired smirk on his lips. The weight of the people’s hope rests on their shoulders now, and they’ve got a duty to see this through to the end.

“You’ve messed with the wrong Thieves, Yaldabaoth.”

Lapis flames burst forth from Dream's feet. Immense power flows through him, rushing through his veins. Arsene flickers behind him, becoming more and more solid as his power grows.

Chains whip around Dream, bathed in the same blue flames. Dream's fingers close around them and with a single thrust, he snaps them, the chains shattering, dissolving into fire that blaze even more fiercely.

Arsene roars, enveloped by the flames, consumed by it. The sphere of energy explodes, comets shooting high into the clouds. Curling around Dream's ankles still burn the blue flames with the same intensity, never faltering, a single beacon in the sky as black as night.

Yaldabaoth hisses, sounding very much like a feral cat caught in the height of danger. He, again, prepares his rays of control, the dragon's fangs bared, violet eyes piercing through the dark.

"Look!"

At Skeppy's call, Dream glances back. Descending from the heavens is a being larger than even Yaldabaoth itself. It is cloaked in pure darkness, its golden horns gleaming, scarlet eyes glowing, its wingspan as broad as Yaldabaoth's itself.

"What is that?" Fundy stares, wide-eyed.

"Is that...a Persona?" Eret squints.

Dream spins on his heels, drawing his pistol, his coat whipping about his thighs.

"Do you think something like that can stop me?" Yaldabaoth snarls, but Dream can hear the fear in his voice, simmering beneath that baritone. "This is why man is doomed."

Dream does not turn away from the blast now, not when he's overflowing with power ready to face any threat. The rays of control never do strike them again, reflected by a barrier formed of green orbs, every one filled with the prayers of the people.

"What?" The fear is unmistakable in Yaldabaoth's voice now. "How can you...?" It sounds no different from the fright in the whimpers of the criminals they've taken down.

Dream aims his pistol at Yaldabaoth's head, the Persona aiming its own revolver at the god, charged up with the might of the seven deadly sins, its barrel glinting under the moonlight.

"Begone."

With a single shot, a single bang, ringing out in the night sky, Dream and Satanael fire, the sinful shell arrowing through the air, a tail of white trailing behind it.

With a single shot, a single bang, ringing out in the night sky, Dream and Satanael end the tragedy once and for all.

*

Chapter End Notes

Our Beginning

Chapter Summary

yaldabaoth has fallen and all that remains is to celebrate christmas...

Chapter Notes

this chapter spells the end of the non-Royal version of Persona 5! Keep reading past this chapter to experience the 3rd semester. Otherwise, I would recommend that you stop here if you want to play the 3rd sem for yourself!

3rd sem will definitely have a lot more tubbo content!

hello peeps how've u been

12/24 - THURSDAY - EVENING

“If a god plays naughty, then it’s a demon lord’s duty to punish him,” Techno says, an arm over his eyes to shield them from the blinding glow.

A hole is blown in the middle of Yaldabaoth’s head, cracks spidering from its core. Dream watches on as Yaldabaoth begins to sink beneath the clouds, body falling apart. Its arms snap, feathers shattering, the dragon motif on its breastplate disintegrating.

“It’s over,” Fundy breathes.

Satanael fades, its job completed, leaving the team staring at Yaldabaoth’s empty husk.

“Preposterous.” Yaldabaoth’s voice is scratchy, disbelieving. “You dare rob the people of its wishes?”

“Yeah, and don’t come back!” Skeppy yells.

“What power...” Yaldabaoth mutters, as its body begins to dissolve as well. The dark of the night sky is replaced with a golden hue, colouring the clouds a beautiful orange and pink. “So that Igor wasn’t spouting nonsense after all...”

Dream watches as Yaldabaoth disappears for good, its remnants fusing to form a golden goblet, one not quite as big as the Holy Grail, but is big enough to fit snugly in his palm.

“This is the public’s Treasure...” TapL mumbles.

“So we’ve officially stolen the public’s heart?” Sappnap asks.

“After taking this, we have,” Dream says, holding the goblet tight.

“Thanks a lot for everything, guys,” Fundy says, folding his paws. Is it just Dream or is Fundy’s fur a tad shinier now?

“It’s you we have to thank,” Bad says with a smile. “Without you, we wouldn’t have made it this far.”

The platform upon which they stand begins to tremble and crumble away. This place is about to collapse, and good riddance.

The goblet engulfs them in a soft glow. Dream’s lids slide shut, face angled at the sky as a gentle breeze caresses his face.

They did it, George. They beat god and saved the world. He's fulfilled his promise to protect Gina.

And now, it’s time for them to head home.

*

[When](#) Dream opens his eyes next, he finds himself surrounded by a swamp of red water that’s come up to his waist. His jaw drops. Wait, what? Are they too late?

Time has stopped; people are frozen in the midst of rushing to work, to school, hanging out with their friends and family.

“Has Mementos fused with the real world?” Skeppy’s brows are furrowed.

[As if](#) on cue, the water around them evaporates, leaving no trace of its existence. The darkness of the storm has passed, the waning rays of sun bouncing off the glittering windows of office buildings. Cars’ tyres screech against the asphalt. The traffic light beside them turns green and people begin to cross the road. They walk by them without so much as a comment; it’s as if they cannot see the Thieves who are still dressed in their Metaverse outfit.

Snowflakes drift overhead, spiralling down to the ground. It gives the whole city a magical touch, a wonderful addition to the shimmer of colourful lights decorating the streets.

Then, everything begins to dissolve before their very eyes into azure, fluttering butterflies.

“Why’s everything-“ TapL starts, alarmed. However, a calm voice interrupts him.

“The whole world is a product of cognition. Not just the Metaverse. It can be freely remade. Not just for you, but for everyone else.”

Dream glances back at Fundy, stunned when he realizes that Fundy is translucent now, the road and cars behind him somewhat visible through his body, blue butterflies slowly trickling from the ends of his paws.

“Fundy! What-?” Dream runs towards him, only to be met with an invisible barrier riddled with spurts of energy. He slams his fist against the barrier. “Fundy!”

“A new world will be born. A new world where mankind isn’t held captive,” Fundy says, gazing up at the sky. He begins to hover, floating higher and higher into the air. “You know, you guys were the best team I’ve ever worked with.”

“We’re the *only* team you’ve ever worked with, you asshat!” Sapnap shouts. “What the heck’s gonna happen to you?”

Fundy doesn't respond. Instead, he smiles down at them.

"The 'real world' doesn't exist. What each person sees and feels is what shape reality. That is what gives the world infinite potential."

Dream watches, heart sinking to the pits of his stomach.

"Even if the future looks dark, as long as you see it through as one, everything will work out in the end."

The Phantom Thieves are silent as the last of Fundy's essence is extinguished, replaced only by escaping blue butterflies. Dream bites his lip, fighting back the tears gathering in his eyes, staring at the ground as the last of the Metaverse erodes away.

Now, even Fundy's gone. Fundy who's been with them since the start, who's taught them everything they know. Fundy who has always been a part of their team, no matter what happened.

"We won't...we won't see Fundy again...right?" Harvey fidgets restlessly.

"You didn't have to say it like that," Nick mutters.

"Fundy will be in our hearts forever," Darryl says, eyes glistening as well.

Blade looks up from his phone. "The Meta-Nav is gone."

"So the Metaverse really *has* disappeared..." Eret stuffs his hands into his pockets.

The streets are busier than Clay expected, the crowd mostly consisting of people rushing home in time for their own Christmas Eve celebration.

"Come on, guys! Cheer up!" Zak says, slinging an arm around Darryl's shoulder. "I don't think Fundy'd want us to be moping around."

"Yeah," Clay says, smiling. Fundy *would* say that. Probably. Or he'd be mad that they were having a party without him.

This time, on the train ride back to the Armstrong residence, the Thieves leave a part of them behind. A part that has defined them and made them who they are now. Even though the Metaverse may not exist anymore, whatever remains – the memories, the bonds they've forged, the hardships they've gone through together – will stay with them for as long as time allows.

*

["Aren't](#) you cold?"

"Huh?" Clay shakes his head. Mrs Armstrong opens the door, settling down on the rocking chair beside him. From within the house, Clay can hear the screams and laughs of the other Thieves who are, apparently, gaming in the living room.

Mrs Armstrong offers him a fruit tart, which Clay accepts gratefully. Perhaps he's just extremely tired after the whole Yaldabaoth fight that they had just minutes before, but he's barely eaten and interacted much with anyone during the dinner.

An ominous feeling creeps up his spine. For some reason, Clay figures that whatever Mrs Armstrong wants to tell him, he's not going to like it.

“How was the dinner?”

“It was...fine.” Clay pops the tart into his mouth.

“I see.” Mrs Armstrong wrings her hands. She doesn’t seem to know how to breach this topic, which is a first for her.

“What do you want to talk about?” Clay asks.

Mrs Armstrong sighs. “It’s about...It’s about Singh’s case.”

Yeah...Clay didn’t think that that would be the last he heard of him. “What about it?”

“We need a witness,” Mrs Armstrong says. “Someone who can testify to his crimes. Unfortunately, you know how his associates are...” Clay hums. They aren’t going to testify against Singh, because then they would expose themselves and their unlawful deeds.

“So you want me to testify,” Clay says.

“Basically, yes.” Mrs Armstrong drops her gaze. “However, for the court to accept your testimony as evidence, you have to admit to being a part of the Phantom Thieves.”

Ah. There’s the catch.

“And that means we’ll have to apprehend you.”

Clay purses his lips. This is for the sake of the Thieves, as well as the rest of Singh’s victims. “I see.”

“We’ll have to put the case together as soon as possible, and that means that you’ll need to come with me...tomorrow.”

“On Christmas Day?”

Mrs Armstrong nods. Clay opens his mouth to speak, only to be cut off.

“I’ll do it.”

[Clay](#) freezes. He knows...he knows that voice. The voice of someone he’d always see behind his lids when he closes his eyes. The voice of someone that he’d want ever so desperately to hear before he sleeps at night.

“It’s...you...” Mrs Armstrong stands.

Clay can hardly believe it, mouth agape as he takes in the sight of George standing under the streetlights, a familiar fox on his shoulders. He rubs at his eyes. No way. This has got to be an illusion, or a hallucination. There’s absolutely no way that George can be alive right now.

Floris hops off George’s shoulder as the latter walks over, hands in his pockets.

“Wait, how are you...?” Clay crosses the distance between them, breaths coming out in puffs. His arms ache to encircle him, but...

We were never anything, Dream.

Respecting George’s wishes is more important.

“I don’t know either,” George says, shaking his head. “After the whole engine room fiasco, I woke up at the side of the road. I don’t have any memories of what happened between that and...and waking up, though.”

Clay nods stiffly. George looks past him, at the house full of life. Mrs Armstrong pushes the door open for Floris and he squirms in.

“I assume Gina’s there? She wasn’t at home.”

“Yeah,” Clay says. “Do you wanna see her?”

George shakes his head. “Maybe after I’m free to go. Or if she’s willing to visit me.”

“Wait, but...” Clay furrows his brows. His fingers twitch, resisting the urge to grab George’s wrist. “I can’t let you do that.”

“Why not? I owe you one.”

“Yeah, but...” Clay bites his lip. “I...”

“I’ll be charged as a minor,” George says, dipping his head, a small smile on his face. “I doubt I’ll be given the death sentence, so there’s that.”

“But...” Clay lowers his eyes and draws a deep breath. At least George is alive. Somehow. That is all Clay can really ask for right now.

“Besides, I found Floris wandering around uselessly at Valentine’s,” George says, gesturing to the house. “I think he was about to freeze to death.”

Clay laughs lightly, trying to blink away the moisture in his eyes. He nods at Mrs Armstrong.

“I can go whenever. Even now.”

Clay can only watch as Mrs Armstrong leads him away into the car, headed, quite possibly, for the police station. He’ll go visit George. Definitely. Clay fails to suppress a giggle which evolves into full-blown laughter full of glee.

George is alive. It doesn’t matter how, but he’s alive. Even if George doesn’t want to be with him in that way, at least they can be friends. Clay can tell him all about what transpired between the engine room battle and Christmas Eve. Perhaps, when George leaves juvenile hall on probation, he can bring him around the city again. Play at the arcade, darts and billiards, go shopping...the possibilities are endless.

Clay stares up at the twinkling stars, still quietly chuckling to himself. It’s as if the universe has answered his silent plea for happiness after all he’s been through.

This Christmas is quite miraculous after all.

*

[12/24 – THURSDAY – EVENING](#)

“Where the heck did you come from anyways?” Clay asks, sitting on his bed cross-legged, positively glowing.

Floris shoots him a look that bounces from disgust to bewilderment. “I know you were excited to

see him again, but that's just cringe."

"What? No." Clay tries to pretend that he doesn't have a wide grin plastered on his face. "You haven't answered me."

The other Thieves had been shell-shocked as well, according to Darryl, and Floris had explained everything while Clay had been out in the snow. Floris straightens his posture and harrumphs.

"The only 'me' that has disappeared was the Metaverse version of me," Floris says. "But this fox form is here to stay!"

"Huh." Clay folds his arms. "Now you're my pet fox?"

Floris bristles. "Pretty much. Although I'm more like a friend fox. Not a pet."

"No longer human?"

"Yeah. I'm a fox now. Actually," Floris says, tail swishing. "But don't do demeaning stuff like play fetch, okay?" He considers this for a while, before muttering, "Or maybe we can play just one...round...?"

Clay chuckles. Floris yips.

"In all seriousness, though, you look...uh...happier," Floris says. "Way happier."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Yo." Nick strides into the room, towel around his neck, hair damp. "Dad's bringing Gina to an IT convention tomorrow. Wanna come with?"

"Not like we have anything else to do," Clay says, shrugging.

Floris nods, yawning. "Yeah. I'm gonna go ahead and get some sleep. Good night!" With that, Floris is out like a light. Clay pulls himself to his feet and heads to the bathroom to shower.

Life is back to normal, as it should be.

Peculiarity

Chapter Summary

the new year heralds a strange dream...and even stranger occurrences...

This is the first chap of 3rd Sem! Last warning to stop here if u don't wanna get spoiled!

Chapter Notes

hmm not very satisfied with this chap but since there aren't any shrine visits or anything in the west...so presenting the abnormalities are a little harder.

12/31 – THURSDAY – EVENING

“Are you ready to start the countdown?” the emcee screams into the microphone.

“Yeah!” Gina screams with the rest of the crowd. Clay can’t help but remember just how far she’s come. She had been a shut-in when they first met, yet has regained so much of her confidence that she seems like a whole new person now.

For now, Gina has moved into their home since there’d be no one to take care of her otherwise. Mrs Armstrong had transformed the guest bedroom into one that would suit Gina nicely, transferring most of her electronics over a couple of days.

Clay has not heard a word from George, on the other hand, but Mrs Armstrong is doing the best she can to get him a lighter sentence, apparently. He has no idea how that works, but he trusts her.

Meanwhile, the rest of the team is gathered in the crowded streets of Valentine Hills, where the city’s biggest New Year’s countdown is to take place. Zak and Darryl are feeding each other clouds of cotton candy.

“Ten! Nine! Eight!”

Harvey sips on a fizzy drink. Eret is staring up at the massive countdown timer on the stage.

“Seven! Six! Five!”

Nick and Floris are yelling at each other about something or other again. Probably a spilled ice cream cone, judging from the mess on Nick’s coat.

“Four! Three! Two!”

Blade shoves a hand into a pocket, the other holding up a hotdog and really packing it away.

“One!”

The timer rings shrilly and the first of the fireworks is launched into the air. A flower of red blossoms in the black of the sky, followed by explosions of green, yellow, pink and blue.

“Happy New Year!”

Gina cheers, pumping her fists into the air and punching Clay in the chest. Clay yelps. Gina doesn’t seem to notice, drunk off the atmosphere. Confetti flies everywhere, mixing with the snowflakes. People are screeching and yelling merrily, celebrating the start of a new year.

[“Come](#) on,” Eret says. “Let’s get home. I’m sure *some* people have strict curfews, even for the New Year.”

“Yeah, tell me about it,” Nick mutters, scratching his head. His phone buzzes and he picks it up. It’s probably Mr Armstrong, buried somewhere in the crowd.

“My dad’s here,” Nick says, ending the call. “Come on, let’s go.”

“I think we’ll be sticking around a while longer,” Darryl says. Zak drags on his wrist and they weave through dancing bodies. Eret, Harvey and Blade are heading home as well, making their way as a group to the train station. Meanwhile, Clay and Nick are focused on getting a giggling Gina through the throngs of people to reach the main street, where the Armstrongs’ car is parked.

“Had your fun?” Mr Armstrong asks with a slight yawn.

“Yeah,” Gina says. “Let’s come again next year. And the year after that.”

Mr Armstrong chuckles and helps her get into the car. Nick helps to fold her wheelchair up and Clay hops into the back with Floris laying on his lap. The trip back home takes longer than Clay would have liked, eyelids as heavy as lead as he stares out the window, fingers running through Floris’ fur as Gina leans against his shoulder, snoring quietly.

Thank goodness school doesn’t start for a while or he’d be absolutely exhausted.

It’s strange how easily they’ve just slipped back into their normal lives after that whole Yaldabaoth debacle. Mementos had disappeared, bringing with it the rest of the Metaverse.

Clay already misses the snugness of the mask on his face.

Mr Armstrong pulls up to the driveway, switching off the engine and shaking awake a disgruntled Nick. Meanwhile, Clay helps Gina with her wheelchair and pushes her into the house. She is, apparently, dead to the world. Moving her is like carrying a rag doll, limp limbs hanging by her sides as she remains in the clutches of slumber.

“It’s time you kids get to sleep too,” Mr Armstrong says. “It’s always best to get as much sleep as you can. Especially when you’re still schooling.”

Not like Clay’s got the energy to keep awake anyway. All he really wants is to slip into the deep recesses of sleep for a few days at least. He flops into his bed without even changing out – he’ll deal with that tomorrow – and closes his eyes.

*

[??/? - ??? - ???](#)

Where is he?

Clay's head hurts. His hand comes up to massage his temple, blinking rapidly. His vision clears, and so does his mind. The area is dark with nary a light, but he recognizes it. Isn't this...the counselling room back in Enderlands...?

It is...and it isn't at the same time. It's like Clay is trapped in an illusion. He isn't staring at the room, per se, but a likeness of it. Clay pushes himself to his feet. A feeling tugs at him, a single thought rattles his noggin.

Perhaps he should go home. Leave this place. That's what the tiny voice in his mind is telling him.

Clay begins to walk. Each step is effort-laden, as if he's weighed down by balls and chains. Speaking of balls and chains, he's dressed in that tattered prisoner's uniform again. When did that happen? Wasn't he in his casual clothing?

Go home.

Yes. He's getting home. Soon. No need to nag at him.

"If only Neil hadn't died...Mom wants me to be like Neil..."

"Adrian had been my best friend...I have to be strong for him..."

The school's hallways are dark and deserted, but most of all, familiar. Just turn that corridor...turn right at the junction in front...then head out the gate...

A flash of light catches his attention. A blue...butterfly? Clay's feet move on their own, as if drawn to it like a moth to a flame.

"I want to be a good leader. One who can serve the school for the students..."

"Mother...Garrett...why did you leave us?"

He trudges ever so slowly. His breaths are laboured, the frigid air scratching at his throat and lungs. He turns the corner and begins to walk down another long hallway in front of him.

"Was there a reason Father had to die?"

"I'm done with that life. A life where people ostracise me for having different ideals..."

He turns the second corner. The gate is past that door. He's almost there. Almost home.

"I'm definitely a human. I guarantee it."

"Why me? Why does it have to be me?"

Clay passes through the door. The soreness from the exertion is slowly draining what remains of his energy, gathering in his thighs as he continues to shuffle forward.

"I wish I could have saved you, Patricia. I wish you didn't have to go through that."

"I should have been the one who died...not Thomas..."

Clay reaches the gate, placing both hands on the freezing metal. A draft whips around him, and Clay shivers.

"Do you want to leave?"

Clay frowns. It's a feminine voice. A voice that he knows...but...where has he heard it from?

"Yes." His voice is throatier than he imagined.

"Isn't this where you belong?" The voice sounds disappointed. There is a slight pause, before it continues. "I see. It seems that you haven't accepted it yet."

Leaves quiver in the howling gale. Clay wraps his arms around his middle in an effort to keep warm.

"Very well. I won't force you into anything. We shall meet again."

With a tinkle, the voice is gone and the gate slides open with a creak. Oh, and it seems that the blue butterfly has vanished as well. Clay wonders where it's went.

Still, it's time to...go home.

*

1/1 – FRIDAY – MORNING

When Clay awakens, Floris isn't with him. That's strange. Floris doesn't usually get up any earlier. Oh, and Nick isn't in his bed either. Probably went down for breakfast.

Clay drags himself to the bathroom to wash up, still pooped after that whole celebration. Maybe it's a good idea to just grab some breakfast, lie in bed or play some Mimecraft with Tommy and Tubbo.

"Morning," Mr Armstrong greets when Clay ambles down the stairs, stifling a yawn.

"Morning." Clay rubs at his bleary eyes. His phone buzzes. Oh. A message from Tubbo, inviting him to a food fair not far from Jule Halls. He would invite Tommy, but the latter is out with his parents for the day.

"Oh, you're finally awake. Took you long enough."

Wait. Clay freezes.

That's not a voice he knows. Other than Mr Armstrong, who is reading the papers at the dining room, another orange-haired teenage boy is seated opposite him, stuffing his face full of bacon.

"Who are you?" Clay asks, cautiously shuffling over.

"Huh?" the boy looks up at him. Yeah...Clay has never seen him in his life! "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Is that a New Year's joke?" Mr Armstrong says with a chuckle. "Floris with bedhead does look a little peculiar, but he's still Floris."

Floris? *Floris*? Clay gapes at the boy, who's still crunching on the bacon. Isn't Floris...Isn't... Huh?

The door swings open right that moment, when Clay is still trying to understand what's going on here. In steps Nick and...someone else. A boy who looks exactly like Nick, beads of perspiration trickling down the sides of their necks, dressed in matching tracksuits...

“Oh, Clay. I thought you were dead since you wouldn’t wake up or anything,” Nick sniggers.

“Who’s that?” Clay asks, gesturing at the other boy.

The other boy tilts his head curiously. “I...I’m Neil?”

“Why are you always so nice to everyone?” Nick sighs, patting Neil’s back. He strides past Clay and declares that he’s going to shower. Neil closes and locks the door behind him, toeing off his shoes.

Isn’t Neil...

“Floris,” Clay says, still unable to get over the fact that Floris is now a *human*, of all things.

“Where’s Gina?”

“Gina? Why’re you looking for her?” Floris asks. He doesn’t question it, though. “She’s at home. Said she’s going to some food fair with her mom and brothers or something.”

What the hell? What the actual hell is happening here? Clay wants to punch a wall and demand them to explain to him just what these oddities mean. His phone buzzes again – more messages from Tubbo.

“Breakfast is ready.” Mrs Armstrong emerges from the kitchen with two plates of bacon and scrambled eggs. Clay thanks her and seats himself at the table, staring at his plate. Not even Mrs Armstrong remembers? She returns to the kitchen to continue preparing breakfast.

He’ll deal with this later. In the evening, perhaps. For now, he has breakfast to finish and a food fair to get to.

*

[1/1 – FRIDAY – DAYTIME](#)

“Thanks for coming out here with me,” Tubbo says, biting down on a fried chicken wing.

“Don’t worry about it.” It helps to take Clay’s mind off things, anyway. There has been a strange feeling that he’s been unable to shake off, a peculiar feeling that everything is not as it should be.

“Tommy’s parents are really getting on his case about his grades,” Tubbo says. “They’re seriously strict. Maybe because they’re police officers or something.”

Clay frowns. “Maybe.”

“Oh! They’re selling pizza over there. I promised mother dearest that I’ll get her something,” Tubbo says, squeezing past the crowd towards a stall in the distance. Clay can’t help but glance around. Floris mentioned that Gina and her brothers and mother would be here, didn’t he? Then again, the sheer number of people gathered here aren’t helping matters.

After walking around for just a while longer, Tubbo’s phone rings, and they find a spot to stand while he answers the call. When he hangs up, he flashes Clay an apologetic smile.

“Sorry, my dad’s here to pick me up,” Tubbo says. “I’ll see you in school, then?”

“Yeah. Of course,” Clay says. He *could* spend some time looking for Gina and, well, George, but honestly, it’s easier to just drop them a message. Since he’s heading out anyway, he follows Tubbo, elbowing and jostling past people and making for the exit.

“There you are.” A middle-aged man walks up to them, adjusting the spectacles on the bridge of his nose. He notices Clay’s presence, and nods in acknowledgement. “You must be T____’s friend.”

What was that?

“This is Clay,” Tubbo says. “He’s like my best friend. After Tommy, of course.”

“Indeed.” Tubbo’s father smiles. “Nice to meet you, Clay.” He turns to Tubbo. “Shall we go?”

Tubbo waves goodbye to Clay who can only wave back awkwardly. This day is just getting from weird to weirder.

At this point, Clay is willing to pass this off as a fever dream. Maybe he’s caught in an illusion constructed by his own subconscious. Perhaps he’d wake up tomorrow and realize that everything is back to normal.

Floris as a human. Neil being alive. Gina’s mother and brother being alive. That weird conversation with Tubbo’s father...

Those thoughts fill Clay’s head, bouncing around in his mind, as he leans against the carriage, scrolling through his chatlogs on his phone. His eyes widen as a message pops up with a familiar profile picture.

George: I need to talk to you. Tomorrow, preferably

Talk to him? About what? Is George not being in detained part of this absurd reality as well?

Me: sure. diner?

George: okay

Clay feels almost relieved. Maybe George knows something about this. He’d have a reasonable explanation and everything will be fine.

Everything will be fine. That's all Clay can really believe in right now.

Tubbo's Tragedy

Chapter Summary

the pain of living with what you've done...can never be truly erased...

Chapter Notes

wooo just finished my merciless run! w/o fighting reaper, j&c, lavenza or jose because i laze. skipped FMVs and everything that i could skip and amounted to around 50 hours!

dream SMP spoilers:

i had not expected the kidnapping victim to be connor ngl
also TUBBO AND TOMMY MEETING ??
DREAM CONFRONTATION (also i thought he was really gonna lose one canon life here or something)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

1/2 – SATURDAY – MORNING

“Alright. Do you know what’s happening here?” Clay asks, leaning forward against the table. George bites into his croissant, copious amounts of melted butter pouring from it.

“That’s what I wanted to discuss with you about,” George says, chewing and swallowing quickly. “I thought I’d lost you just like everyone else, honestly.”

“Clearly not,” Clay says, shaking his head. The waitress delivers his coffee and Clay thanks her. George continues munching on his bread. Clay stirs his coffee with the tiny spoon. “And also, why’re you here? Not that I’m not happy to see you, but...” He trails off, unable to bring himself to say it.

“Yeah,” George says. Croissant flakes fall onto the plate. “That’s the first thing that made me suspicious.”

“Suspicious?”

“That the world isn’t as it should be,” George answers, mild irritation creeping into his voice. “I was released after one round of questioning, Clay. After I had confessed.”

“That’s weird.”

“Exactly, but honestly, what’s more surprising is-“

“How people who are supposed to be dead are alive,” Clay finishes.

“Yeah.” George’s gaze drops to his tea. “Like my mother, and Garrett. Oh, and Gina can...she can walk again.”

Clay sips at his coffee, the wondrous smell of caffeine wafting around them. George pauses mid-chew.

“Wait, who else is alive?” George asks.

“Um...Nick’s brother. Oh, and Floris is a human now.”

George hums, narrowing his eyes. He blows on his tea.

“Anyway, I was hoping you knew something about it,” George says. “For now, I need you to fill me in on whatever happened between our fight in Singh's Palace and Christmas Eve.”

Clay gives him a brief overview of what happened, from defeating Singh and beating Yaldabaoth, saving the world from involuntary enslavement.

"I see." George nods. "Honestly, I think we should team up on this and investigate.”

“Sounds good.” The only problem with this plan is that they have no idea where to begin. Everything is just so strange, so *weird*, that-

Clay’s phone buzzes incessantly. He glances at George, who nods. He answers it.

“Hello?”

“Clay.” Tubbo’s voice crackles through the phone. “There’s something here at Lara Stadium. It’s like, a big building. Like the building we went in before with that fox of yours. The one that can talk.”

There’s only one building that Clay can think of that fits that description, and that can’t mean anything good.

But why? Haven’t they destroyed the Metaverse for good? Why is it back?

“I’ll be there. Wait for me.”

“Alright. Please hurry.”

Clay hangs up and downs his steaming cup of coffee, hacking and coughing as the beverage burns his throat. He manages to finish it, though, looking up just as George is wiping at his mouth.

“Was that a friend of yours?”

“Yeah, it’s Tubbo,” Clay says. “He said he saw a Palace at Lara Stadium.”

“Let’s go, then,” George says. He rises and follows Clay out of the diner, heading for the train station.

1/2 – SATURDAY – DAYTIME

“Oh! Clay! There you are!” Tubbo waves at them with a sort of urgency that Clay’s rarely seen on him. They, he and George, rush over from the train station. He glances worriedly behind him, at the gargantuan structure that incites alarm between the duo.

“This is a Palace,” Clay says.

“Um...” Tubbo gives George a side glance.

Clay nods. “He knows.”

“Oh.” Tubbo scuffs his soles against the ground. “Well, I think it was the same building we went into the last time.”

The Palace with the unnamed ruler. Clay bites his lip. There’s no reason at all for a Palace to exist now, but yet here it stands, tall and imposing.

“Clay,” George says, a hand on his shoulder, shoving his phone into his face. “The Meta-Nav.”

Clay and Tubbo peer over at George’s phone’s screen. Sure enough, the eerie eyeball widget is back, staring up at them intimidatingly, challengingly. While the app is no longer a glaring blend of red and black, the new silver is not making it any more comforting.

“I have that too!” Tubbo reaches for his phone and unlocks it, opening it up to his home screen, revealing the existence of the app which happens to be of the same colour scheme as that of George’s.

“Does it say whose Palace it is, though?” Clay asks. Perhaps they may get a hit this time.

Unfortunately, that is not the case. The Palace Ruler’s name is a bunch of gibberish. So is the location and the distortion, apparently.

“If there’s a Palace, then we only have one option,” George says, thumb hovering over the button that would take them spiralling into another all-too-familiar dimension.

“Are we going in?” Tubbo asks.

“Yeah.” Clay nods. “George?”

The world pulses around them, giving Clay a slight headache as they are whisked away into the Metaverse. The building that had been nothing more than a faint tower has now evolved into a surreal skyscraper complete with strange ornaments such as gigantic security cameras.

In any case, Dream, George and Tubbo have transformed into their Phantom Thief suits. Perhaps the Metaverse isn’t done for just yet. Instead of the snow-white goggles that Navi wore, George’s current mask is pitch-black. Clay’s chest constricts.

“You’re a Phantom Thief too?” Tubbo asks.

George nods, folding his arms, Loki floating behind him. “Tubbo, you’re not very strong, are you?”

Tubbo wrings his hands. “Not exactly...”

“Then it’ll be dangerous for you two to fight alone,” George says. “I can join you in battle. Loki

has limited navigational abilities compared to Necronomicon, but it'll have to do."

"Navigation?" Tubbo sounds confused.

"We'll explain later," Dream says. "George, can I...your codename..."

"You can call me 'Navi'," George says. "Now, let's stop wasting time and get in there."

Dream swallows thickly and turns back towards this new Palace. It's strange that Tubbo can see it even though they weren't in the Metaverse till a few minutes prior, but the least they can do is to poke around inside. It may hold some clues as to the oddities that they have experienced thus far.

An elevator takes them up to the next floor, the rumbling the only sound in the air as the trio is transported higher and higher up.

*

Dream recognizes this hallway. The hallway with cognitive beings dressed all in white. The hallway where he, Tubbo and Fundy were chased back into the elevator by persistent Shadows and descended all the way back to where they had entered from.

"There's a door over there," Navi says. "Let's go check that out."

The door in question, which had been locked the last time they were here, leads into a familiar lobby, one with pristine marble flooring and white concrete walls the colour of snow.

"What are those?" Tubbo whispers, pointing to a black shape striding about with a clipboard in hand, a white coat draped loosely over its shoulders. "Wait, isn't it one of those enemies we saw last time?"

"Shadows," Navi says, retrieving his chakrams from his belt. "It seems weak. We can take them on."

Dream nods. If George says so.

[George](#) sends a chakram at the Shadow, the razor blade whizzing through the air straight at its back. To Dream's surprise, the Shadow falls to the ground, shapeshifting into an amorphous blob.

"What?" Even Navi is caught off guard. With a flick of his wrist, Loki returns the chakram to his hand. The Shadow turns and bursts into its demonic form, a faceless man wielding a scythe.

"Stay close to us," Dream whispers to Tubbo. Tubbo nods stiffly, Cendrillon flickering behind him.

Other Shadows begin to converge, drawn by the confrontation. Dream summons Baal and unleashes blades of wind that cut through the air straight at the scythe-wielding Shadow. Navi shoots one leaping at him.

Dream whips his head around as Tubbo screams. A skull is upon him, the snake that has made the skull its home hissing and spitting a flurry of dark spheres at him. Dream barely takes two steps towards him when Cendrillon appears and sets up a shield of light, blocking the skull's onslaught.

"There's too many of them," Navi mutters. "We have to break through them!"

Dream cuts the skull attacking Tubbo in half and pulling him by the wrist. The trio race past the crowds of skulls, scythes and strange winged organisms. Navi slams his shoulder into the first door he sees, barrelling through. Dream stumbles in with Tubbo in tow. With a single, powerful kick, he

slams the door shut.

“Seal it!” Navi shouts.

Dream summons Scathach. The temperature drops as ice begins to appear on the door and its hinges, making it utterly impenetrable to external forces. Meanwhile, Tubbo leans against the wall, trying to catch his breath.

[“Are](#) you alright?” Dream asks.

Tubbo has a hand on his chest, trying to calm his palpitating heart. “I’m fine.”

Dream turns to Navi, who appears to be consulting a map. It’s incomplete – perhaps due to Loki’s less-competent navigational skills. There’s no telling where the corridor they find themselves trapped in will lead.

There’s only one way to find out.

“Where does this go?” Tubbo asks, peeling himself off the wall once he’s regained his composure.

“No idea,” Navi says, taking measured steps. “Let’s go.”

Tubbo trails after Navi uncertainly, and Dream takes up the rear.

Navi nudges the door open, and once he’s confirmed that there aren’t any enemies behind it, he heads out into the new corridor, with blinking turquoise lights and pots of synthetic plants lining the walls.

The lack of Shadows here is...unsettling.

[“Brother?](#) Are you there?”

Tubbo’s head snaps up. He glances at the ceiling, eyes darting around frantically. Dream has heard that voice before. Not quite sure where though...

“Stay on guard,” Navi says. Dream steels himself.

“Brother? Please come! I’ve been waiting!”

Before Dream can stop him, Tubbo is sprinting to the end of the corridor, footsteps thunderous against the marble. Dream and Navi chase after him, right on his heel.

Tubbo slams into the door at the end of the corridor, the door swinging open to reveal an auditorium, where a prize ceremony is currently taking place with only two cognitive beings, one a smartly-dressed emcee and the other a boy who looks exactly like Tubbo, save for several slight differences, such as the curlier hair and the slouch.

“Oh? Is that...?” The emcee raises her brow.

“It’s my brother, T___!” The boy on the stage cries out. “Hello, T___! Look! Look how far we’ve come!”

Tubbo stands rooted to the spot. He’s trembling visibly, the horror on his face evident as he treads meekly over to the stage.

“Thomas?”

“Thank goodness you can make it!” Cognitive Thomas walks down the stairs, trophy in hand. “We won! We won the competition!”

Tubbo glances down at the plate on the base of the trophy, then shakes his head. “No, we didn’t... *I* didn’t win this one.”

“Well, not officially, but you...you gave me the strength to keep going,” Cognitive Thomas says, hand on the nape of his neck.

“You were always better than I am!” Tubbo cries.

“But T____...”

“I’m not him! I’m...I’m Thomas!” Tubbo’s fingers are in his hair. “Stop talking like I’m...”

At that moment, Cognitive Thomas vanishes, the golden trophy clinking as it hits the ground. The cognitive emcee is gone as well, leaving nothing but a microphone in her place.

“Tubbo...” Dream starts. Tubbo sinks to the ground, arms wrapped around himself, quaking.

“I’m Thomas...I swear I am...” Tubbo’s voice cracks.

“Then why shouldn’t you be?”

Dream looks up. Navi tenses. A woman saunters over to them, her hair falling past her shoulders in wavy locks. She is dressed completely in white, her skirt flouncing around her hips as she walks.

“Doctor...?” Dream relaxes his stance.

“Dr Montgomery...” Navi mutters. “She’s not a cognitive being.”

Montgomery nods, a solemn expression on her face. “The past is painful, isn’t it? Why should you live in such a reality, then?”

What does that mean? Live in such a reality?

“I don’t want to...” Tubbo whimpers, sinking even lower against the ground, if that’s even possible.

“What are you doing?” Navi asks, voice laced with suspicion.

“I’m giving Tubbo a chance at happiness,” Dr Montgomery says with a flourish. “His current reality can never bring him true happiness. He is doomed to live with everlasting guilt and sorrow.”

“I don’t get it!” Dream shouts, frustration growing. Live with everlasting guilt and sorrow? Does it have something to do with his dead brother?

Dr Montgomery gestures to a large screen that has appeared.

“Perhaps it is better if I showed you. That way, it is easier to understand why Tubbo does not want to return that life.”

Static buzzes on the screen for an instant before a movie begins to play. Dream squints. It’s not quite a movie. Not really. That’s not the feeling he’s getting.

The streets are crowded with people headed home for the day, umbrellas held up in defence against

the pelting of heavy raindrops. The protagonist of the film is no different, trudging quietly behind another boy who appears to have a spring in his step despite the gloomy weather.

“Well, I guess we gotta go back and polish up that code,” the boy says, glancing back. “We’ve got one more day. That’s a lot of time.”

“Yeah...” The protagonist dips his head, gaze dropping to the ground, at his feet as they shuffle through the puddles of water.

“Hey, what’s the problem?” The boy pauses, whirling around and tilting his head. He looks exactly like Tubbo, just...not him. He looks like Cognitive Thomas, if Dream is being completely honest.

“It’s nothing.” The protagonist speaks. There’s no mistaking it. The person whose eyes they’re looking through is Tubbo’s.

“Doesn’t look like nothing.” Thomas says, clucking his tongue. “I know! Let’s go out for ice cream. My treat.”

“Ice cream?”

“Yeah. A celebration, you know,” Thomas says. “A sign of victory!” He hops into the puddle in front of him, spraying water up into the air. Tubbo doesn’t cheer. His vision blurs, colours mixing, lights turning stringy before them.

Thomas is always better.

Are those Tubbo’s thoughts?

Why does he pity me like this?

Tubbo breaks into a run, dropping his umbrella, water drenching him from head to toe.

“Where are you going?” Thomas’ voice is alarmed. He drops his umbrella, eyes on the sidewalk as he dashes forward. He brushes past a woman who nearly drops her suitcase, jostles past a group of schoolboys who turn to yell at him.

“Please! Stop!” Thomas’ voice is getting fainter and fainter, drowned out by the blaring of car’s horns and people’s shrieks. Thomas screams Tubbo’s name, but Tubbo doesn’t stop, not even when the concrete beneath him gives way to asphalt.

Light flashes. Tyres screech. An umbrella snaps.

Tubbo jerks forward, body hurtled onto the ground, elbows scraping the rocky surface of the road. The rain is getting heavier now, enveloping the area in a mist-like cloak, but the crimson pooling on the ground is unmistakably blood. The boy lying motionless on the ground, thrown a fair distance into the middle of the junction on the road, is none other than Thomas.

“Thomas!” Tubbo cries. “No!” He staggers to his feet only to fall back onto the ground, knees buckling.

The clip ends there, jarring static once more taking over the screen. Tubbo rises to his full height, his Phantom Thief outfit flickering, Cendrillon completely absent.

“Wait, so you’re not actually...you’re not actually Thomas,” Dream says quietly.

“I thought so,” Navi says, hands tucked into his pockets. He turns to Dream. “I investigated the

people close to you when trying to set you up, but when I did my research, I found out that...that Thomas was already long dead.”

“But what is wrong in wanting to erase that part of your reality?” Dr Montgomery asks, spreading her arms out. “If Tubbo’s unimaginable pain can be cast away, if he can be happy, by being his brother, then I would grant him that wish by all means.”

“So you are altering reality?” Navi asks. “You can do that?”

“With this power...I believe you call a Persona?” A formless mass wavers behind Dr Montgomery that slowly gains shape. It appears to resemble a cross, cable-like tentacles slithering along the walls.

“What?” Dream stares, slack-jawed.

“I thought people with Personas couldn’t have Palaces...” Navi mumbles.

“I awakened to this power on the day the sky turned red,” Dr Montgomery says. “When Azathoth spoke to me, I knew that the heavens had chosen me.”

“Chosen you? Don’t give me that,” Navi growls.

“Yeah. Who in their right mind would want to change reality?” Dream says, stepping forward. “You’re just exerting your power like a tyrant!”

Dr Montgomery chuckles. “A tyrant? I’m sure Tubbo thinks differently.”

Tubbo rises, looking more haggard than before. His eyes have lost their spark of life, his shoulders sagging. He turns to face them.

“Tubbo?” Dream asks.

“I can’t be...I can’t return to that life,” Tubbo says between pained gasps of air, as if something is eating at him from the inside. “Thomas died because I was being dumb and selfish. I can’t be that person who killed him!”

“Don’t you see?” Dr Montgomery says, her shoes clacking on the chiselled marble flooring. “Why do you deny Tubbo the happy reality he wants to live in? What right do you have to keep that from him?”

“We can’t accept this reality,” Dream says resolutely. It’s not right. It’s just not.

“And it’s not just him,” Dr Montgomery says. “With this power, I can make everyone in the world happy. Everyone can live their ideal reality.” She smiles. “You two are included in the people whom I want to save.”

“Us two?” Navi asks.

“You have been living in pain, the both of you,” Dr Montgomery says forlornly. “If you accept my offer, I can ensure that you can atone for your crimes, George. I know you want that more than anything. To atone and to go back to your sister and your frie-“

“You don’t know anything.” Navi cocks his gun, barrel pointed straight at Dr Montgomery.

“No! Don’t-!” Tubbo lunges at Navi and slams his shoulder into Navi’s side. Navi grunts, taken by surprise. His finger pulls the trigger and the stray bullet smashes into the ground, cracking the

marble floor.

“I really don’t want to fight you...” Dr Montgomery’s voice is soft. “I do genuinely want you to be happy.”

“Not if it means that I’ll be living under another person’s thumb the rest of my life,” Navi snarls, glaring at her.

With a flick of her wrist, Dr Montgomery’s Persona, Azathoth, grabs Tubbo by the limbs, lifting him high above the ground.

“Tubbo!” Dream whips out his dagger, only to be shoved aside by Navi, the latter narrowly saving him from a beam of white. It seems that they have company.

A black, alien organism descends from the ceiling, its yellow eyes blinking, emitting an incomprehensible beeping. Navi rolls off him, drawing his pistol and summoning Loki.

Tubbo doesn’t respond, knocked unconscious with Azathoth’s power. There’s no way either himself or Navi can reach him, not with this...alien organism in their path.

“I shall not let you pass.” The organism’s voice is monotone, sounding more distorted than anything. “Our Mistress must be protected at all costs!”

“We’re going to have to do something about this thing before we can get to Tubbo,” Navi says, raising his revolver and firing a couple of shots, shrugged off by the organism. “Dream, keep it busy. I need to scan it.”

Dream nods, summoning Black Frost and conjuring a snowstorm. The temperature drops, freezing the organism’s tentacles and gluing them to the ground with a shell of ice. The organism snaps free from its confines, but the one second of immobility gives Navi enough time to draw up a screen depicting its affinities.

“It’s a Hastur. Drains Psi, reflects Garu,” Navi says, dismissing his screen. “No other significant affinities.”

Azathoth lowers Tubbo’s limp body into Dr Montgomery’s arms, the rest of its tentacles held out in front of them like a shield.

“I cannot let you take Tubbo’s happiness away from him, nor can I let you take anyone else’s,” Dr Montgomery says, throwing out a hand.

Hastur is bathed in a glow of orange. It roars, a tornado tinged with green swirling around its body. Dream and Navi leap to the side, dodging the tornado aimed at them. The wind tears the auditorium apart, scooping furniture into the air, ripping at flashy banners and streamers.

Navi launches his chakrams laced with tails of darkness at the Hastur. One of the spinning blades slice several tentacles, the severed tentacles falling to the ground with loud thumps. The other razor-edged blade cuts into its side, drawing arcs of black blood that splatter to the ground.

Dream summons Dionysus, flinging bolts of crackling electricity at Hastur, the stench of singed alien flesh revolting even to Dream’s seasoned nose. The way it convulses is so satisfactory, though.

“Is there no way I can convince you?” Dr Montgomery asks as Hastur screams in pain, the noise it makes so warped that Dream has to jam his fingers into his ears. She jerks her chin at Hastur and

Azathoth spears it with a multitude of tentacles, much to the duo's shock.

"What's she doing...?" Dream whispers.

Hastur's subsequent screech pierces their eardrums, but what Dream notices are its healed wounds. The regrowth of its tentacles, the reknitted flesh and the vanishment of blood from the floor. When Azathoth's tentacles retract, Hastur is good to go again, charging up for another Megidolaon beam.

"With her healing that thing, we can't beat it unless we kill it in one hit," Navi says.

"Then we kill it in one hit," Dream says, digging an Ender Pearl from his pocket. Navi nods in understanding.

Hastur fires off its beam of white, forcing the duo to dive away from each other. Navi rolls away, drawing his chakrams and engulfing them with coats of black. With a mighty swing, Navi sends the chakrams through the air once more, the blades singing as it chops Hastur in half.

Dream hurls his Pearl, the orb soaring over Hastur's head and landing behind it. He draws his dagger and lurches at Hastur, slashing and slicing and dicing, the blade cutting through its hide like knife through butter. Hastur doesn't get an opportunity to scream before it bursts into a million particles of dust.

[Dream](#) turns back to Dr Montgomery with a triumphant smirk. "Now give Tubbo back."

"I'm sorry, but I cannot let you do this," Dr Montgomery says, clutching Tubbo closer to her. "The two of you may not want this, but I suggest that you have a little chat with your friends first. Maybe...Perhaps..." She turns away, voice growing smaller and smaller. "It may convince you."

"Hey! Come back!" Dream shouts, about to give chase. She took Tubbo with her after all! However, Navi drags him back with a hand on his shoulder, shaking his head.

"Not today. We need to come up with a game plan," Navi says. "I just analysed her Persona's power and she's way stronger than we think. We don't stand a chance, Dream."

Dream grits his teeth, irritation bubbling up within him, but he acquiesces. If Navi says so...

"If what she's saying is true, then we can assume that the other Thieves are very much affected by this as well," Navi says. "We're going to have to get them to come to their senses."

Dream sighs, sheathing his dagger and running a hand through his hair.

"Let's get out of here for today and regroup," Navi says. "I doubt the Doctor will do anything to Tubbo."

Navi's right, as much as Dream hates to admit it. With their current power, they will most definitely require the Thieves' help. With a Goho-M in hand, he tosses it to the ground and lets the smoke take himself and Navi back to the entrance.

*

[1/2 – SATURDAY – EVENING](#)

When Clay returns home that night, he finds the rest of the house empty, a single text message from Nick telling him that the entire family save Fundy has gone out to visit one of their relatives living the next town over and that they won't be back till Wednesday.

Floris is seated on his own bed which is, apparently, Ant's bed that has magically increased in size, reading a comic book borrowed from Neil's bookshelf.

"Hey," he calls when Clay returns. "Where were you?"

"Out with George."

"Oh, right. You guys are so sappy it hurts," Floris says with a nod. "Dinner's in the microwave, though we're going to have to eat out from tomorrow."

"I can cook." Clay climbs the stairs leading up to his bed. No, not exactly his bed. Neil's bed.

"Really?" Floris sounds disbelieving.

Clay doesn't know how to approach this. If what Dr Montgomery said was true, that she can manipulate reality as she sees fit and that she wants to make the world happy...does that mean that being a human makes Floris happy?

"You okay? You're just staring into spa--"

"Floris, how do you like being human?"

"Huh?" Floris tilts his head. "Who the fuck just goes up to someone and asks how they like being human?"

"Just answer the question."

"I wouldn't want to be anything else," Floris says with a frown.

"Are you sure about that? Not forgetting anything important?"

Floris' face twitches. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just think about it," Clay says. Floris has got to come to the conclusion on his own, especially since Dr Montgomery's got her hold on him. If Clay just gives it to him straight, Floris is just going to reject the idea outright.

"Um..." Floris scratches at his chin, staring at the ground. "I mean..."

"I believe in you."

"Dude, you can't just say cryptic shit to me and expect me to..." Floris sighs. "Never mind. Let's just...go to sleep."

Clay turns onto his side, retrieving his phone from his pocket, revealing a few messages from George.

George: I'm going to continue investigating the extent of the doctor's power

George: and try to get gina to snap out of it too

George: Meanwhile, I think u should talk to the rest of ur friends as well

George: we'll meet back at lara stadium on the 9th.

George: that should give u enough time to contact all ur friends

Clay sends an affirmative message right back at him. He opens up the chat with Darryl and sends him a quick message.

Chapter End Notes

i have no idea how i managed to write that whole part without writing Tubbo's name once

wrote like the whole hastur fight while watching quackity's bday stream lol

So Happy World

Chapter Summary

a world where everyone is happy and no one is sad...

Chapter Notes

crap this chap is awkward as hell idk how to end the scenes help

1/3 – SUNDAY – DAYTIME

Valentine Hills' underground mall is packed like sardines on a Sunday. Clay jostles past people trying out food samples in front of stores, dodging a few pushy salespeople, barely noticing Darryl and a familiar boy in front of a handbag shop displaying the flashiest of handbag designs. Darryl's eyepatch seems to have disappeared. Is that also a part of Dr Montgomery's influence?

“Hey!” Darryl waves enthusiastically. Clay recognizes the other boy instantly. It's Adrian, Darryl's best friend who had moved to another part of the city and no longer attends Enderlands High.

“Hello.” Clay walks up to them. “Adrian, right?”

“Yeah,” Adrian says meekly. Soft-spoken, like Clay remembers. Darryl beams.

“Do you wanna help us pick out a handbag, Clay?” Darryl asks, sifting through several leather ones. “I have to meet Zak after this and Adrian's got a family gathering next week and-“

“Adrian's a good friend, isn't he?” Clay interrupts. Darryl looks up in confusion.

“Yeah. Adrian's a good friend,” Darryl says. “Why did you ask?”

Adrian peers up at Clay questioningly, more curious than offended.

“You'd protect him at all costs, right?”

“Yeah.” Darryl frowns. “This is getting really suspicious, Clay.” However, his eyes are glazed over, as if remembering something important.

“It's nothing,” Clay says, dipping his head. “Just continue thinking it over, Darryl. I believe in you.”

“Thinking it over? Think over what?” Darryl repeats. He goes quiet, and Clay waves a small goodbye to Adrian before heading back to the train station.

*

1/3 – SUNDAY – EVENING

Floris is already asleep by the time Clay returns to the dark house. He hits the sack quickly as well, wondering how George's investigation is coming along.

Darryl seemed pretty content with this life, where he gets to hang out with Adrian, in a reality where they have never been abused by Krones. Moreover, he's still boyfriends, or at the very least, friends with Zak. They may be happy, but is this how it should be?

Just before he goes to sleep for the night, Clay fires off his next message, content when he receives a reply in seconds.

*

1/4 – MONDAY – DAYTIME

“You're late!” Zak cries, dragging Clay by the wrist into the building and out of the biting cold.

“Sorry. The train was delayed.” There had been a lot of people on their way to this particular art exhibit, where Zak's mother's painting, the Sylvaria, is to be displayed. The true painting, that is, and not the one that Marion had painted over.

“Eh, whatever,” Zak says, grinning from ear to ear, dragging Clay past the crowds of people all queuing up to get their ticket checked and to see the Sylvaria. Thank goodness Zak has a part to play in this exhibit and gets him past the long, snaking line.

The Sylvaria is easily the painting with the largest number of people gathered around it, despite the numerous paintings depicting considerable talent put up along the walls and folding screens. Even Clay can feel its radiance from where he stands behind them.

“Doesn't it look nice there?” Clay asks.

“Yeah. It's amazing, huh,” Zak says, eyes trained on the painting. “My Master was the one who wanted to hold this exhibit in its honour.”

“Are you happy living with her?” Clay asks, shifting his weight from one foot to another. “Your Master, that is.”

“Huh? Of course I am,” Zak says with a tilted head. “What do you mean?” He frowns, furrowing his brows, as if having recalled something.

“I believe in you,” Clay says.

Zak turns back to the Sylvaria, requesting to be alone. Clay respectfully leaves him be and decides to head home as well.

*

1/4 – MONDAY – EVENING

Zak seemed pretty content living in Marion's house under her tutelage. Moreover, it seems that in his ideal world, the Sylvaria's true beauty has been revealed for the public to see. However, is this how the world should be?

In any case, Clay has another friend that he'd like to see tomorrow...

*

1/5 – TUESDAY – DAYTIME

When Clay spots Eret, he's waving goodbye to a bunch of friends near the school. Clay knows those people - he's seen them a couple of times. They're members of the Student Council.

"What's going on?" Clay asks, shoving his freezing hands into his pockets, forcing himself not to hop on the spot.

"We were preparing for O-week," Eret says. "Trying out some new ideas, like bonding games."

"Bonding games, huh?" Clay watches as the other students walk down the street headed for the train station.

"Yeah," Eret says. "Would you like to hear about the plans?"

Clay shakes his head. "It's nice to have so many people to talk to, isn't it?"

"Yes, of course." Eret nods.

"Even as the Student Council President, people will still obey you no matter what?"

Eret shrugs. "Why are you asking me this, Clay?"

"Just think about it," Clay urges. He peers up at Eret, who seems to be in deep thought. He asks to be left alone for the day and Clay decides not to intervene further.

*

1/5 – TUESDAY – EVENING

Clay sends out his next message after crawling into bed. Floris isn't home again today but has left a bag with the Big Bang Burger logo on it in the kitchen. Clay wonders where he goes half the time, but Floris can take care of himself.

Eret appeared rather happy being accepted into his little circle of Student Council members. It's likely that he has no problems being welcomed into the student body either. However, is that how the world truly should be?

Clay sighs and plugs his charger into the phone just as his phone buzzes with the awaited reply.

*

1/6 – WEDNESDAY – DAYTIME

When Clay finds Harvey, he's speaking to his father about something, gesturing at an empty lot beside the darts and billiards place in the streets of Beatty which happen to be relatively quiet. Perhaps it's because it's a weekday and at this time of the day, most people are at work.

"Oh! He's here!" Harvey cries, beckoning Clay over.

It's strange to see Andre Lee standing here in all his glory, name clear of any scandal, because in this perfect world of Dr Montgomery's, those don't exist.

"How are you doing?" Clay asks, giving Mr Lee a nod.

"Fine, I guess," Harvey says, nodding excitedly. "We're thinking of getting to work opening that

chain of cafés.”

“Indeed, and Harvey has a great business sense,” Mr Lee says. “He *is* my little protégé, after all.”

Harvey flushes, but Clay can see the clear pride on his face.

“Your father’s nice, isn’t he?” Clay says.

“Yeah, he is,” Harvey says with a bright smile. Mr Lee is speaking with another shopkeeper, choosing to leave Harvey and Clay alone.

“Are you happy?” Clay asks.

“Happy? That’s a weird question to ask,” Harvey says, scratching his head. “I’m happy, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Nothing amiss with your father?” Clay asks.

“Nothing...” Harvey repeats, muttering to himself. “Um...I don’t think so...” He trails off at the end, as if he’s just pondering something.

“I believe in you.”

Harvey waves absently as Clay departs, making for home.

*

1/6 – WEDNESDAY – EVENING

Clay lays in bed, staring up at the ceiling, thinking back to his encounter with Harvey. He and his father have an amicable relationship now, much different from the one they had in their alternate reality, where Mr Lee had been tainted with the sin of greed.

Clay scrolls through social media that night with a sense of unease. The more he talks to his friends, the more unsure he feels about the whole situation. His friends appear to be genuinely happy about this reality. Does he have the power to strip this right from them?

Just before Clay prepares to sleep, his phone buzzes with a new message.

*

1/7 – THURSDAY – DAYTIME

Clay leans against the wall of the precinct’s exterior, wondering what George is doing. He has made no move to contact him at all and has yet to respond to any of his messages. Perhaps he’s truly busy, and Clay does feel a little bad for repeated messages. The precinct isn’t located in the heart of the neighbourhood, so all Clay can really do for entertainment if his eyes aren’t glued to his phone is to stare at cars that zoom by. A familiar voice calls out to him.

“Clay? Oh! It *is* you!”

Clay looks up, intrigued when he sees Phil walking down the steps alongside his partner, both dressed smartly in suits, detective badges glimmering in the waning sunlight. Clay waves awkwardly.

“Waiting for someone?”

“Yeah,” Clay says, nodding. “Is Blade in there?”

“Blade? Oh. Yeah, he’s coming out now. We’ve just finished our meeting,” Phil says.

Clay watches as Phil and his partner head off towards the carpark, talking about a potential fishing trip during the weekends. Almost immediately, the automatic doors slide open and boisterous laughter fills Clay’s ears. He turns to find Blade walking out with a bunch of other officers, smiling and chuckling and, overall, enjoying the conversation.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Blade says, stopping outside the precinct where Clay is standing. The other officers say farewell and disperse as well. When they’re finally out of earshot, Blade turns to Clay.

“So, what’s this, uh, five-minute conversation you’d like to have?” Blade asks, folding his arms.

“You’re pretty well-liked, aren’t you?” Clay asks.

“Yeah.” Blade nods. “What’s your ulterior motive here?”

“Do you like it?” Clay presses, ignoring his question. “The attention, the acceptance?”

Blade gives him a look like he’s trying to puzzle him out. “Of course I like it.” Despite the surety of his tone, he’s fixing Clay with the most misty-eyed look.

“You can figure this out,” Clay says, nodding.

Blade hums. He and Clay walk to the station, the silence hanging over them somewhat tense.

*

1/7 – THURSDAY – EVENING

“Welcome back.”

Neil greets him from the living room, watching a movie with Floris, the latter still looking lost and not really focusing on the movie. Clay is still startled whenever he speaks, because honestly, with the both of them participating in the conversation, it sounds like he’s talking with two Nicks. Speaking of which, Nick himself emerges from the kitchen, carrying with him a few cups of soda.

“Where *were* you?” Nick asks, handing Neil his cup of soda.

“Uh...I met with Blade.”

“Oh. Him? Getting all buddy-buddy with him now?” Nick sips from his own cup. “Mom asked you to clean up the room, by the way. Left all your books lying around.”

Clay yawns, nodding. “By the way, am I sleeping in the guest room?”

Nick tilts his head. “Huh? You’re sleeping on the top bunk. Neil volunteered to sleep in the guest room, remember?”

“He did?”

“So you’d feel less...alone?” Nick says, suspicion on his face.

“Oh. Sorry.”

“You okay? You’ve been a little...out of it since the start of the year,” Neil says worriedly.

“He’s wonky,” Nick says. “Just a little wonkier than usual.”

Clay sighs. “I’m heading up to bed.”

Nick, Neil and Floris let him go without any resistance. Clay lays on his bed. He’d ask Nick to go out and have a nice morning jog tomorrow with him. That’ll give them some time to speak privately.

Clay shuts his eyes with his phone flat against his chest. He’s agreed to meet George on the ninth, so he should be expecting a message tomorrow evening at the latest.

Still, it’s not like any of the other Thieves got back to him about whatever they’ve discussed. Moreover, he can’t stop worrying about Tubbo. He’s not hurt, is he? Clay doubts it, seeing as how Dr Montgomery wants him to experience as much happiness as possible in exchange for freedom, according to George.

He’s got one more day to convince his friends. After that, more likely than not, they’re diving back into the Palace to save Tubbo.

*

1/8 – FRIDAY – DAYTIME

“God, I haven’t run in, like, forever,” Nick says, chugging down a canteen of iced water.

In this universe, Neil never died, and Nick didn’t run to take his mind off things sometimes. Clay plops down on the bench next to the vending machines, a bottle of Kickapoo in hand.

“How’s Neil doing?” Clay asks.

Nick pauses, scrutinizing him. “You saw him yesterday. You tell me.”

“No, I mean...” How else can he approach this? “Are you happy when Neil’s around?”

“Yeah. Why would I not be? I mean, he can get a li’l annoying and shit, but...” He frowns.

“What’re you getting at?”

Clay shakes his head. Realization dawns on Nick’s face ever so subtly, pulling his lips into a frown. The sun peeks out from behind the trees, rising rapidly into the sky.

Clay believes in Nick to arrive at the truthful reality. The walk back home is silent, with neither side making any move to speak. Nick requests for some time alone to think about things, and Clay respects that.

His phone buzzes as soon as he takes one step into the kitchen, drawn by the aroma of pancakes.

George: dinner tonite?

Clay’s heart soars for a moment before it plummets. George is not asking him out on a date. He’s asking to share information, probably, before they take the plunge again, but this time likely into uncharted waters.

Clay slips his phone into his pocket. He’s got plenty of time to prepare, though with every quiet second that passes, his hope diminishes.

*

1/8 – FRIDAY – EVENING

George: tomorrow, lara at 9

Me: want to meet for breakfast first?

George: ojay

*George: okay**

Clay lets his arm fall to his side. Tomorrow, they're going back into the Palace, and they're going to save Tubbo from Dr Montgomery's clutches. He's rather interested to see what George has found out too.

Clay hears Floris enter the room and settle down in his own bed without so much as a greeting. Clay rolls onto his side, throwing the duvet over himself. He's got a big day tomorrow, whether his friends are willing to help him or not.

*

1/9 - SATURDAY - EARLY MORNING

"You're going somewhere?"

Floris is awake, surprisingly, laying on his bed with his phone in hand.

"Yeah. Breakfast with George, then Lara."

"Lara Stadium...? Well, I'm not sure what you're going to go there for, but have fun, I guess," Floris says, voice sounding less enthusiastic than Clay has ever heard before.

Clay leaves Floris with that sliver of information before heading out, hoping that the Thieves will rekindle the tiny bit of hope that still rests in his heart.

*

1/9 – SATURDAY – MORNING

"So, I've uncovered some things," George says, nibbling on a sausage.

"About Dr Montgomery?"

George nods. "She's been researching about cognitive psience for years now, it seems. Ever since college. Something about 'the treatment of patients through the change in cognition'."

"She told me about that herself."

"That aside, she also had a couple of investors willing to fund her research. There had been plans to break ground on a research facility somewhere."

"But that never happened, right?" Clay peels away the liner around his muffin before taking a large bite.

"No," George says. "For some reason, her funding was cut and her research was ended for her."

“So her research was stalled.”

“Simply speaking.” George nods. “We don’t know the reason, though.” He sips on his cup of tea. “We don’t even know the reason the Doctor started her research in the first place.”

The reason? Clay ducks his head, blowing gently on his Americano, the black liquid rippling. Something nags at the back of his mind, a possible reason to her actions...

“Anyway, that’s all I can dig up about the Doctor,” George says. “She’s obviously using her powers to ‘save’ people. We saw what happened to Tubbo.”

“In a sense, she’s making herself happy too with this distorted reality,” Clay says.

“Yeah.” George finishes his sausage and gets started on his poached eggs. “And if she really believes that she’s doing this for good, then we’ve got a dangerous enemy on our hands.”

“About...about that...” Clay mutters, fingering the grip of his cup.

George fixes him with a look akin to a scowl. “You’re not telling me that you’re backing out? That you actually want to *live* in this place?”

“It’s not that!” Clay shakes his head vigorously. When he opens his mouth to answer, all he draws is a blank. “I don’t...We’ll take down Dr Montgomery. That, I can promise you.”

George face is obscured by his cup as he drinks from it, but Clay doesn’t think he’d like the look on his face. He places his cup back on its saucer with a clink. “Oh, and one more thing.”

Clay hums questioningly.

“Neil Armstrong, my mother, Garrett and Andre Lee are by no means dead,” George says. “For all records and purposes, they’re alive.”

“So they’re not cognitive beings or anything?”

“No. They’re really alive and existing in this world.”

Clay chews slowly, digesting the information. If even deaths have been altered, then...“What about Singh?”

“He’s been the only one arrested for his crimes. The Phantom Thieves have caused a stir in society, but there has been no trace of your arrest at all,” George says.

This sounds suspiciously like...Clay shakes his head. It’s not possible. He won’t allow himself to be captured in Dr Montgomery’s trap. Clay finishes up the last of his muffin and places the liner back on the plate.

“Basically, in this world, you and I have not committed any crimes,” George says.

“Is this what she meant when she said she wanted to save us?” Clay mumbles.

George presses his lips in a firm line, musing. “Still, that’s pretty messed up, making us want to stay in this kind of reality.”

Clay nods. He can understand where George is coming from too. He’s spent so long living his life under Singh’s thumb, living under the weight of his own guilt. He downs his coffee and places it back on the saucer.

“You’ve got some crumbs over there.” George reaches over with a napkin, brushing at Clay’s lip. Clay goes rigid, acutely aware of the gentle pressure of George’s fingers through the fabric, face going extremely hot. George disposes of the napkin and rises, apparently oblivious to the effect that he has on Clay.

He doesn’t want to be with you that way. Clay shakes the thought out of his head.

“Are you coming?”

The more he tries not to think about it, the more he does. Even the picture of George standing in the sun’s rays, a hand in his pocket with another pushing against the door of the diner is enough to stir up emotions Clay has thought he’s buried a while ago.

“Yeah.” Clay nods. There are more important things to think about than some stupid emotions that just won’t go away.

Waking Up

Chapter Summary

saving tubbo

Chapter Notes

last chapter before the new year! the actual new year this time haha

1/9 – SATURDAY – DAYTIME

Nick rings the doorbell. It sucks being the ones living furthest from Gina's residence. She said that she had something to discuss with the team, so here they are. Floris hangs back as someone opens the door – Gina herself – and invites them in.

"Is your mother home?" Nick asks, glancing around as he steps in. It feels like forever since he's been here.

Gina shakes her head. "She took Garrett to the dentist."

She walks over to the dining room where the rest of the team has gathered. They look up when the trio arrives, moving aside and inviting them into the tight-knit circle. Gina takes her place at the empty chair. Nick knows for certain that Clay had talked to the other members of the Thieves after receiving several messages, primarily from Gina and Darryl. Floris had mentioned it once or twice as well. Although what this can mean, they have yet to discuss.

"Do you guys have memories that doesn't match up with what we know?" Gina asks.

"Like what?" Nick asks, the question catching him a little off-guard. "I mean...I had a dream that Neil died."

"So did I," Harvey says. "In my dreams, my father was this big tyrant and, uh..." He trails off.

The rest of the Thieves agree, describing their own versions of the memories they've suddenly recalled.

"The weird thing here is the timing of those dreams," Floris says. "We're all having them right after talking to Clay."

"Yeah, that's what I thought," Blade mutters. "He asked me whether I like what's happening right now. The attention and all."

"He asked me something like that too," Darryl says, nodding. "At first, I was sure that the question was kinda weird, but when I thought about it, I wasn't anymore."

"It's like...reality contradicted with our memories..." Zak mumbles.

“But I don’t think our memories are false,” Gina says, wringing her hands.

“Then does that mean that *reality* itself is false? Is that what you’re trying to imply?” Blade asks.

“Maybe,” Nick says. “Look, we’ve all been in the Metaverse. There were some weird shit that happened because of it. Like all the mental shutdowns and everything.”

“I mean, I haven’t been there,” Gina says, holding up her hands, “but you know, you could be right.”

But hasn't the Metaverse been destroyed? It makes no sense for it to have been revived...unless something, or someone, even more powerful than Yaldabaoth has brought it back to life.

“But I’m...” Darryl sighs, gaze dropping to the table. “I’m scared. It’s like I’m trying to run away from something.”

Harvey nods. “There must be a reason I wanted to...I wanted to forget.”

Silence hangs over them. No one dares to breathe a word. That is, until Nick straightens his back and makes a declaration.

“I’m done running away,” Nick says. “Clay wanted to tell us something and here we are ignoring that.”

“You’re right.” Zak nods. “If we turn our back on him now...what kind of friends are we?”

“We’re just a bunch of pussies if we don’t remember,” Floris says, closing his eyes, scrunching up his nose. “So we need to remember, dammit!”

With that, it’s as if a spell has been broken, their altered reality shattering before their very eyes. Memories flood back into him, both the good and the bad, the joy and the sorrow, the anger and bitterness.

In this unaltered reality, Neil is...Neil is dead. No wonder Clay had been surprised to see him alive and well. Nick glances back at the others, the most obvious changes being Floris and Darryl. No longer a fox, Floris now sits on the table, tail swishing tranquilly. Darryl, on the other hand, has only one working eye, the other a milky colour.

“That was...” Gina frowns. “So it’s true. Mother and Garrett...”

The grief that fills the room is intense. A sudden grief that takes their breath away, sending immense pain through their chests, keeping them slumped in their chairs. Just a tiny part of him... just a tiny part of Nick wishes to return to the reality that they’ve left behind, to immerse himself in the happiness and peace that that reality had promised him.

“No time for...no time for mourning, everyone,” Floris says. “We need to-“

“The fox can talk?” Gina cries, staring at Floris with eyes as big as dinner plates.

“Yeah.” Eret nods. “He’s always been speaking, just that you couldn’t hear him since you’ve never heard him speak before.”

“Details, details.” Floris sighs, whiskers twitching. “Everyone, Clay told me that he’s going to go out with George to Lara Stadium.”

“You think he could be infiltrating a Palace?” Harvey asks.

“Maybe,” Blade says, standing and preparing to leave. “What are we waiting for?”

Zak and Nick help Gina back into her wheelchair before the Thieves depart for Lara Stadium. They’ve let Clay fight this battle for far too long. Besides, they have a favour to repay.

1/9 – SATURDAY – DAYTIME

The Palace is as serene as ever, even with the Shadows gliding about. The calm elevator music playing overhead is soothing, if not for the fact that they are here to find Tubbo and rescue from Dr Montgomery’s grasp.

The only foreseeable problem they may face is that Tubbo won’t want to go with them. From their previous encounter merely a week ago, he seemed more likely to side with Dr Montgomery.

Tubbo’s sorrow stems from the loss of his brother which also brought about his survivor’s guilt. They will have to find a way to convince him to reject Dr Montgomery’s alternate reality, but how are they going to convince him to accept the terrible pain and sorrow that come with the truth?

That’s...something for them to think about later; they’ve got to find him first.

With only two people infiltrating the Palace, Dream can’t help but feel on edge. The Shadows here are definitely stronger than that of previous Palaces, or even in the depths of Mementos. If they make even a single fatal mistake, there will be no one to back them up.

Dream recognizes the same lobby with the corridor that leads to the auditorium, the one where Dr Montgomery had confronted them the last time. Alas, that door is locked, and won’t budge no matter how Dream tries to force it open.

“I don’t sense anyone behind that door,” Navi says. “I don’t think they’re there.”

“Then maybe they’re further in,” Dream says. Perhaps they’ve only breached the tip of the iceberg.

There’s another door that Navi identifies with a little more investigation, its white surface hidden well against the wall. This one, on the other hand, is unlocked, allowing Dream and Navi access to the new corridor that will lead further into the Palace.

This corridor is flanked by doorways leading to smaller halls, each hall resembling classrooms. They’re filled with cognitive beings sporting dreamy expressions, some seated on the benches, others just ambling about, but all are drinking in the contents of presentation slides displayed on the screen. They’re nothing more than brainwashed zombies at this point.

Even if Navi doesn’t say anything, the disgust on his face is evident. He takes out the Shadow ahead with a charged chakram, the Shadow falling and bursting into ash.

At the end of the hallway is a set of silver double doors. Dream is about to push it open, only for Navi to rest a hand against his shoulder.

“Wait.”

“What? Is it...?” Dream trails off. Navi nods. Dr Montgomery is behind that door, and who knows what trick she’ll have up her sleeve this time. Clay nudges the door open and is immediately blinded by the spotlights cast upon them.

“You have returned.”

Dream peeks through the gaps in his fingers, still squinting against the light. It’s only when it dims does he remove his arm completely and take in the scene before him.

They are standing in what must be another kind of auditorium, one with a platform in the centre, cushioned benches lining the walls. A large holographic model of a human heart is displayed in the middle of the room, right above a throne where Tubbo sits. His head is thrown back against its backrest with no sign of consciousness.

[“Let](#) Tubbo go!” Dream says, hand on the grip of his dagger.

Dr Montgomery stands with one hand on the armrest of the throne, the other in the pocket of her coat. Her Persona, Azathoth, hovers behind her, tentacles glistening with a fine shamrock colour. She shakes her head with a small smile.

“I thought your return meant that we could negotiate. I sincerely thought that you’ve come to see my side of the situation,” Dr Montgomery says, shaking her head with a drawn-out sigh.

“We haven’t and never will,” Navi says. “Give Tubbo back.”

“What about your friends?” Dr Montgomery asks, the innocent glint of her spectacles somewhat menacing. “I know you’ve talked to them. Are you willing to strip them of their happily-ever-afters?”

“That...” Dream falters.

“That doesn’t matter,” Navi says, stepping forward, drawing his revolver. “Tubbo. Now.”

Dr Montgomery appears surprised but regains her composure almost immediately. “I don’t think you understand. Tubbo doesn’t want to go back to that life.” She turns back to the throne. Right, Tubbo?”

As if on cue, Tubbo awakens, blinking slowly.

“Clay?”

“Tubbo!” Dream cries out, about to run forth when Tubbo stops him with a hand thrown out, Metaverse outfit flickering like static on a screen.

“Why are you still doing this, Clay? Why can’t you just let me accept this?” Tubbo hops to his feet, a hand on his head. “I can’t keep on living like this...” The crack in his voice at the end pulls at Dream’s heartstrings.

“Because it’s not right,” Dream says, standing firm. “I’m sure there are many people out there that don’t want to live their lives controlled by someone else.” It’s the only conclusion that Dream can come to, seeing the vast numbers of people who had supported them during the fight with Yaldabaoth. Those were the people who had refuted the god’s rule and chose freedom for themselves.

“But what Doctor Montgomery said was true, right? That your friends don’t want to go back to that other reality,” Tubbo says. “And...And Tommy’s parents are back, Blade’s accepted by his colleagues, and...and...there are so many people whose dreams have come true.”

“Tub-“ Dream starts, only to leap to the side to dodge an incoming spear of light.

“Please don’t make me do this, Clay.” Cendrillon manifests threateningly behind Tubbo, prepared to throw out more spears of light.

“He’s still weak. He’s not used to his powers yet,” Navi says. With a snap of his fingers, his mask disappears and he’s enclosed in Necronomicon once more. “I’ll be assisting from the sidelines, Dream.”

[Dream](#) nods, turning to face Tubbo. If he’s got to knock Tubbo out and drag him back into the real world, then so be it. Dream draws his dagger and rushes towards him.

Tubbo dodges the attack easily, his athleticism boosted by the Metaverse. Dream plants his heel into the ground, halting his forward thrust just in time to summon Black Frost and draw up a shield of ice.

Cendrillon’s next spear stabs through the ice, the sheer heat radiating from it melting the wall. Dream ducks as another spear flies overhead. A green beam shines on Tubbo, the noises from Necronomicon a comforting sound that Dream hasn’t heard in a long, long time.

“Weak to Ei. Specializes in Kou skills. No other affinities,” Navi says. He sends a wave of green at Dream, giving Dream the speed he needs to dodge Cendrillon’s next spear with only a graze upon his cheek.

Dream summons Nebiros, hurling a couple of spheres of darkness at Tubbo, but the latter has a certain sort of grace to his movements, avoiding the incoming projectiles like a professional dancer. He fires a giant spear at Dream who throws himself out of its path, the lance sailing past his side. He turns back to Tubbo, who merely flicks his wrist.

“Dream!” Navi’s shriek behind him has Dream glancing back, only to see a barrier of tentacles drawn up in place. The spear that he initially avoided has whirled around, tip pointed in Dream’s direction, dissolving as soon as it touches the shield. Dream launches the balls of darkness at Tubbo’s feet, hoping to impede his movements.

One of them catches Tubbo’s leg, exploding on contact. Tubbo screams, hurled against the throne in the middle of the room.

“Tubbo!” Dr Montgomery grasps his wrist, wisps of green curling around his body, healing up all of his wounds. With Dr Montgomery and her powerful Persona, Dream hasn’t come up with a plan on how they’re going to escape with Tubbo in tow.

Dr Montgomery hums quietly. “It’s alright now. You don’t have to fight alone anymore.”

Dream snarls. “You literally manipulated him to do just that!”

“If you want to live as Thomas, if you truly want to escape your pain, I can give you that strength, Tubbo,” Dr Montgomery says, cradling his head as Tubbo lies motionless against her.

Azathoth’s tentacles wrap around Tubbo’s limbs, lifting him into the air. Tubbo doesn’t resist, relinquishing his power entirely to Dr Montgomery. Cendrillon remains on the battlefield, her body now pulsing with crimson, taking on an even more offensive stance.

“Cendrillon’s power is getting stronger,” Navi mulls over the new information. “Do you want me to join in the fight, Dream?”

“No.” There is no hesitation. If there is even a modicum of reassurance that Navi would stay out of harm’s way in Necronomicon, then Dream is going to take it. “Just...provide support, okay?”

Relief fills Dream when Navi doesn't challenge his decision. Instead, he prepares for battle.

Cendrillon lets out the most inhuman sound that Dream's heard, similar to a garbled shriek. At a snap of Dr Montgomery's fingers, she summons organisms clothed in distracting, bright colours, levitating with the help of their devil-like wings.

This is going to get a little...rough.

"Those are Byakhee. Don't use Agi, Garu or Ei skills. Kou skills are best," Navi says. "Use Sraosha. I can cover your weaknesses."

Dream does as he's told, switching up his Personas. He dives to the ground in sync with Navi's shout, dodging a spear of darkness flying over his head. He whips out his pistol. If he can just disable Cendrillon, or subdue her, they'd be able to stop Dr Montgomery's control over Tubbo.

Dream severely burns the Byakhee with pillars of light, the Byakhee screaming and taking to the air. One of Cendrillon's spears of light bounces right off Dream's skin. He makes for the kingpin of the fight, sliding along the ground, awaiting Navi's call.

"Now! Switch to Nebiros!"

Dream gets close enough to Cendrillon, switching from Sraosha to Nebiros, and fires off a bullet charged with pure darkness, prominent against the white of the room.

Cendrillon recoils visibly from the damage, enveloping herself in a ball of light to protect herself from further attacks.

"Dream! Behind you!"

Dream spins on his heels to find the two Byakhee about to unleash a combined attack, conjuring a giant fireball between the two of them. Dream raises his arms in a pathetic attempt to defend himself. Behind him, Navi has switched from Necronomicon to Loki, sending his chakrams through the air, but Dream knows they won't make it in time.

What happens next is something they'd never have anticipated.

Tridents of light spear the Byakhee through the chest, wrapping around them and crushing them. The dust, whatever remains of the Byakhee, is slurped up by the tendrils of light. Dream whirls around, realizing in abject horror when he's met with a white lance.

The chakrams reach them then, the blades cutting the lance in two, leaving Cendrillon vulnerable. Dream raises his pistol, barrel aimed at her.

Just as he pulls the trigger, Cendrillon kicks it out of his hand, the gun flying into the air and clattering onto the ground. Dream scrambles for his dagger, only to be stopped by a lance of light to his throat.

"Tubbo's will is strong," Dr Montgomery says. "Stronger than you can ever imagine. Do you truly have to make this harder for him? Why not accept this reali--"

"Oh shut up!" Navi hisses, revolver in hand, raised at Dr Montgomery, who shakes her head.

"I don't believe you have room to negotiate here," Dr Montgomery says delicately. "Your friend's life is at stake."

Dream *hates* being a liability. He eyes Navi's frown, clenched jaw, and he lowers his gun. Dr Montgomery snaps her fingers again, and Shadows bleed through the walls, transforming into more Byakhee.

Shit. They've been driven into a corner, and there's no way they can get out of it now. Dream's gaze drops to his dagger. If he can just...

Dream draws the blade, driving it up against Cendrillon. Cendrillon jerks her head back, clearly not expecting that attack. A scarlet aura burns around her, a sign of her rage. She grabs a fistful of Dream's hair and slams him into the ground. Pain splits his skull, sounds ringing in his head. He hears Navi's panicked voice and the whirr of chakrams. He is blinded by intense light, catching sight of only Cendrillon's expressionless face as she raises the lance high.

Dream squeezes his eyes shut, bracing himself.

"Oh no you don't!"

A gust of wind whips around the room, sickles of wind forcing Cendrillon off him. Dream coughs, propping himself up on his elbows. Someone squats by him, placing a hand on his shoulder and sending a rush of energy through to his tired bones, relieving him of pain.

"Sorry we took so long," Bad says. "Better now?"

The rest of the team is here as well, putting some distance between Dream and Navi and Cendrillon.

"How...?" Dream starts as Sapnap hauls him to his feet.

"We woke up," Sapnap says with a smile. "All thanks to you."

The sudden fall in temperature has Dream snapping his attention over to the fight. Fundy and Skeppy are launching all-out attacks on Cendrillon, while Eret, TapL and Techno are taking care of the two Byakhee darting around the room.

"The Byakhee are weak to Kou skills! Don't use Agi, Garu or Ei!" Navi shouts, now in Necronomicon once more. "Cendrillon blocks Kou and is weak to Ei!"

"What the—" Bad stares, wide-eyed at Necronomicon's body flashing with green hieroglyphs. "When did he...?"

"I'll explain later," Dream says. He grabs his pistol off the ground and turns back to the battle. "Bad, come with me to fight Cendrillon. Sapnap, you join Eret and the others."

With merely a nod, the Thieves split up. Skeppy and Fundy are barely holding their own against Cendrillon, with Fundy on the offensive and Skeppy on the defensive, throwing up shields of ice left and right to counter Cendrillon's spears.

A spear zips by Dream's head but he doesn't let that stop him.

"Careful!" Navi's voice enters their minds again. "Cendrillon can absorb the Byakhee to heal herself! Deal with the Byakhee immediately!"

Dream ducks to avoid another spear, raising his pistol and shooting at Cendrillon. Cendrillon dodges the bullets with utmost grace, manifesting even more spears to hurl at them.

Fundy conjures twin tornadoes, the spirals of wind laced with tiny, razor-edged hailstones. Bad throws up a wall of flames just as the tornadoes are launched at Cendrillon, protecting them from the pelting hailstones. Cendrillon screeches, unable to protect herself from the onslaught. As soon as the wall of fire dissipates, Dream summons Nebiros, firing off spheres of darkness at Cendrillon.

These strike Cendrillon in the stomach, forcing her to one knee.

“She’s gonna try to absorb the Byakhee! The other team needs more time, Dream! Stall her!” Navi yells.

Cendrillon releases her tridents of light, aimed for the Byakhee, but Skeppy and Bad draw up their elemental shields, freezing and burning the tridents as they soar through the air, while Fundy and Dream lunges at Cendrillon from behind.

Cendrillon howls in rage as TapL hacks the final Byakhee clean in two, its remains bursting into ash. Thanks to that distraction, Cendrillon doesn’t respond in time to Dream and Fundy’s surprise attack. With the help of a tornado, Fundy thrusts Dream into the air, the latter’s pistol aimed at Cendrillon.

It’s as if time slows as Dream tumbles over her head, finger pulling the trigger and shooting one shot which drills straight through Cendrillon’s head. Cendrillon shrieks, the red leaving her body as she collapses. Dream lands on the ground with a loud thump. Crap, he almost twisted his ankle. Not his finest moment, he has to say.

[Azathoth’s](#) tentacles unwind from around Tubbo’s body, lowering him onto the ground. Dream runs forward and catches him as Tubbo falls forward, the last vestiges of his power drained from him.

“I can’t believe...” Dr Montgomery is stunned, taking a few steps back. Azathoth vanishes. “I can’t believe you threw away your happiness to come here...”

“Wait...you’re...” Eret squints. “You’re Dr Montgomery, right?”

“But what’s she doing inside a Palace?” TapL’s gaze shifts from Dr Montgomery to Dream.

“She’s ruling this Palace,” Navi says, stepping forward. “Not only that, she’s the one distorting this entire reality.”

Dr Montgomery shakes her head. “You don’t understand. It’s for your own good.”

Dream hoists Tubbo up onto his back with Bad’s help.

“Our own good?” Techno asks.

“I only wanted to grant your wishes,” Dr Montgomery says.

“Our wishes? We didn’t wish for anything like that,” Skeppy says.

“Is that really true?” Dr Montgomery says quietly. The chamber echoes with silence.

“I see...” Dr Montgomery turns her back to them, Azathoth materializing protectively behind her. “It seems that you deny the reality I’ve created for you. If you want to fight me, change my heart, then so be it. More importantly...” She spares a glance at Tubbo. “I think taking care of Tubbo is more important than this discussion right now.”

As soon as she utters those words, she vanishes. Where'd she go?

"I will hear your final decision on February the third." Dr Montgomery's voice reverberates throughout the room. "If your views can't align with mine, then all that's left is to settle this with a physical altercation."

There's no way that they can agree with what she's doing. Ever.

"As much as I hate to do this, I cannot give up what I've started. It would be an insult to Patricia otherwise..."

With that, they are left alone in that empty chamber, with no signs of Shadows. It appears that Dr Montgomery has given them the opportunity to leave quietly. First things first, they have to get Tubbo out of here.

"We have a ton of questions, Dream," Fundy says, eyes darting to Navi and back to him again. "I hope you know that."

Dream's fingers close around the shell of a Goho-M, resigning himself to the lengthy interrogation that would happen as soon as they leave.

*

[The](#) moment they exit the Metaverse, Tubbo comes to. He blinks, lifting his head off Clay's shoulder.

"Clay?" Tubbo mumbles groggily.

"Can you stand?" Clay asks. Tubbo nods against his shoulder, and Clay lets him down. Tubbo nearly topples, and he would have if Blade isn't there to support him.

"You doing okay?" Harvey asks.

"I'm good," Tubbo says. "A little peachy, but good." He looks unsettled, nibbling on his lip. "Sorry I caused you guys so much trouble..."

Eret shakes his head. "It's not your fault. There's no need to apologize."

"I think we should get Tubbo some rest for now," Darryl says. "We can... We can talk about this later. Over Skype or something."

Clay nods. Tubbo's well-being is their top priority right now. He motions for the rest of the Thieves to head home first, promising that he'd explain everything later, about Dr Montgomery, about the warped reality... about everything that's happened since the start of the year.

For now, he's got to get Tubbo home, the latter stumbling along the path as exhaustion catches up to him. When Clay gets him into a train carriage though, Tubbo falls asleep instantly with his head on Clay's shoulder.

*

[1/9 - SATURDAY - EVENING](#)

"So that's what happened..." Eret mumbles.

"Yeah," Clay says. Everything's returned to normal when he stepped into the house. Neil is no

longer around and Floris' bed has turned back into Ant's old one.

"Wait, but how did George come back?" Blade asks. "That's what I don't get. If he came back because Gina wished it, then shouldn't he be gone now?"

"I'm right here, you know," George mutters.

"Maybe he survived," Clay says. "Like, he never died at all."

"That's possible," Floris says, nodding. "I mean, George has two Personas. He can actually defend himself if he jumps into Necronomicon."

"Makes sense," Darryl says. "Also, are we infiltrating Dr Montgomery's Palace tomorrow or...?"

"February the third...it doesn't give us much time," Eret says.

"We'll probably have to discuss things with Tubbo first too," Clay says. "I think this concerns him as much as it concerns us."

There are no objections with the rest of the Thieves. Clay will talk to Tubbo tomorrow and they'll work out what to do from there. Harvey and Gina log off first, stating that they need some time to think. Some time to come to terms with the deaths of their loved ones again, Clay thinks.

Clay leaves Nick to shut the computer off and drags himself to the bathroom, exhaustion washing over him. The battle itself has been tiring and Clay is certain that the subsequent weeks will be equally, if not more, draining.

They will stop Dr Montgomery, though, no matter what it takes. That is a promise that Clay makes to himself.

*

Unexpected Help

Chapter Summary

the rebirth of the faith arcana

Chapter Notes

HAPPY NEW YEAR :DDDDD do u guys have New Year's resolutions (i dont lol) ?

this chap is more chill. infiltration will start soon tho!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

1/10 – SUNDAY – DAYTIME

“Tubbo.”

“Huh? Oh, Clay.” Tubbo walks up to Clay, who’s waiting at the bus stop for him. “Sorry I’m late. I don’t come around to these parts very often.”

“It’s fine.” Clay fixes him with a concerned expression as Tubbo stuffs his bus card back into his wallet, shoving that into his pocket. They begin the walk over to George and Gina’s house.

“You know what happened yesterday,” Tubbo says, trudging along the snowy ground. “About the fight and everything?”

“Yeah?”

“I...I have to say that it wasn’t one of my proudest moments.” Tubbo says with a sigh, fingers playing with a fraying thread of his jacket. “I...Seeing everyone’s passion...it made me think. It made me think, Clay.”

There is silence, the only sound the plodding of snow beneath their soles.

“Go on.”

“I’ve decided that...it’s best if I don’t cling to my past,” Tubbo says. Clay raises a brow. He can hear the determination in his voice. “Rather than running away from our problems, we should face it head on. So...yeah. I’m not running away anymore.”

“I see.” Clay nods. “That’s admirable of you.”

“I’ve been given this power,” Tubbo says, “and I’ll fight alongside you guys. If you want me.”

I am thou, thou art I. My vow stands renewed in pursuit of the truth. In breaking free of doubt, the chain that impedes thee, is thy strength of heart made manifest. With the rebirth of the Faith Persona, thou hast obtained the winds of blessing that shall guide thee to the furthest depths...

They've reached George and Gina's maisonette. Clay lets himself and Tubbo in, locking the door behind him. Tubbo sticks to Clay as he leads him into the dining room, where the rest of the Thieves have already gathered.

The conversations peter off when Clay arrives, Tubbo hiding behind him ever so discreetly. Darryl and Eret shift one seat over so that both Tubbo and Clay have seats.

"Are you alright? Not hurt, right?" Floris asks.

Tubbo shakes his head. Clay decides to begin the meeting.

"Has everyone come to a conclusion?" Clay asks.

The tension in the air is suddenly solemn. No one dares to speak, not even those more outspoken like Zak or Eret. It's so quiet one can hear a pin drop.

"I think...my answer's the same as everyone else's here," Floris says, leaping onto the table from Clay's lap.

"Yeah," Nick says. "We need to stop Dr Montgomery."

"Everyone out there's like a zombie," Blade grunts.

George agrees. "Like a shell of who they were. Just happy, and nothing more."

"What about you, Tubbo?" Darryl asks.

Tubbo meets Clay's expectant gaze, before standing and facing the team. He nods. "I'm not going to live as anyone but myself now. To be honest, you guys have been an inspiration to me. I think" – he swallows – "I think hardships are essential to our growth, and it makes us stronger. As a person. As people. So...if it's alright with you...I'd...I'd like to fight with you."

[The table](#) bursts into a round of applause. Tubbo flushes, seating himself back down.

"That was a rousing speech, Tubbo," Eret says in approval.

"Yeah," Zak says. "Don't think I could have ever given that kinda speech."

Clay pats Tubbo on the back, a wide grin on the latter's face.

"Well, I guess we're going to have to infiltrate the Palace starting...Tuesday?" Floris says. "Eret, you have Student Council duties, right?"

"I'm stepping down from the Student Council soon," Eret says. "So, no. I'm free tomorrow."

"Alright then," Clay says, clapping his hands. "We'll meet up tomorrow and see how far we can go."

With that, the Thieves' meeting is adjourned. Nick rushes off to his job at the convenience store while the rest of them head their separate ways.

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[1/10 – SUNDAY – EVENING](#)

Clay's phone vibrates, buzzing annoyingly against the wood of his shelf. He puts his book down

and reaches for it. It's a familiar number, one that he knows all too well.

"Hello?" he says, pressing the phone against his ear. Floris perks his head up from beside Clay's pillow.

"Good evening, my dear Trickster." It's Lavenza's voice. It's rather weird *not* hearing either Caroline or Justine through the phone. "I hope I did not wake you?"

How early does Lavenza think he sleeps? "No...no, you didn't."

Clay can almost hear her smile through her voice. "Thank goodness." There is a slight pause before she continues. "I'm sure you are well aware that an individual from your world has distorted reality to such a large extent."

"Yeah," Clay says. "I know. It's Dr Montgomery."

"I see." Lavenza hums. "It seems that you and your friends have come to an agreement to rise up against this new threat."

"Threat?" Dr Montgomery's views and actions may hinge on the extreme side, but he wouldn't go so far as to call her a threat.

"Indeed. Her actions have consequences that reach further than you know," Lavenza says. "I will explain my thoughts in more detail when we meet up tomorrow."

"Meet up...tomorrow? Where?"

The phone crackles with static as Lavenza goes quiet. "At your school. I'm sure that would be easier for your friends as well."

"My friends?" Clay splutters.

"Who's that?" Floris asks, an interested expression flickering across his face. Clay ignores him for now.

"Oh, I must have forgotten to tell you," Lavenza says, as if she didn't just ask him to mobilize his friends for an unplanned meeting tomorrow. Not that it really matters since they intended to meet up for infiltration anyway. "I require your friends to be present as well. Those who have broken free of this alternate reality."

Basically, all the Phantom Thieves. Clay nods, even though Lavenza can't see him. With a quick goodbye, Lavenza hangs up, and Clay plugs the charger into his phone. He taps on the Phantom Thieves' chatgroup.

"Was that Lady Lavenza?" Floris asks.

"Yeah," Clay says. He narrows his eyes. "'Lady'?"

Floris bristles. "Don't. Anyway, what did she tell you?"

"She said that she wanted to talk to all of us," Clay says. "Tomorrow." He sends a message to the chatgroup. Guess they're going to have to postpone their infiltration excursion.

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Darryl has left first to go fetch Zak from the school gates, leaving Clay with George. Clay jolts when someone pokes at his shoulder.

“You’re really slow today,” George says, hauling his bag up.

“No I’m not. You’re just really fast,” Clay huffs.

“And you seem to be paying attention in class today.”

Clay stuffs the rest of his books back into his bag and slings it over his shoulder. “Of course I did. I always do.”

George smirks at that and he weaves past the other desks and students as the bell overhead tolls. Lavenza did ask to meet them in school, but she’s not given them an exact location yet and it’s not like Clay had any chance to contact her at the Velvet Room.

The moment George pushes the door open, Clay notices an unusual blue insect fluttering in the middle of the corridor, giving off a soft, azure glow. It appears invisible to the other students. Most people pass by it without even a second glance, focused on speaking with their friends.

“Is that...” Floris peeks out of Clay’s bag. “Come on! Let’s go!”

Clay and George wade through the throngs of students as they make for the butterfly, which seems to be making its way down the stairs.

“Clay! George!”

Clay notices Tubbo making his way down from the floor above them, hand outstretched, the other arm carrying heavy tomes. Clay waits by the staircase landing for him.

“You needed to meet us, right? Where are we going?” Tubbo asks. The foursome descend the staircase to the first floor.

“Following that,” Clay gestures to the blue butterfly that darts dangerously close to the heads of several students. It then makes a sharp turn and flits into the now-unused room of what was Dr Montgomery’s counselling room.

“Clay!”

Clay turns around to find Eret striding over with Harvey and Blade, the latter with an Enderlands tracksuit hastily thrown over him, disguised as a student here.

“Is that where Lavenza wanted to meet us?” Eret asks.

“Yeah,” Clay says. “Did you see Nick?”

“He went to buy something to eat,” Harvey says. “I saw him at the cafeteria.”

They enter the room, now dusty from months of disuse. However, it has remained mostly untouched. The blue butterfly hovers over the couch before the coffee table, before transforming into Lavenza, sitting daintily. She hugs her signature book to her chest.

She glances around at the Thieves contentedly. “Most of you are here, it seems.” She gestures at the other couch and the armchair. “Please, take a seat.”

The Thieves do. The only people who aren’t here are Darryl, Nick and Zak. Nick shows up with a

doughnut in hand, the fritter coated in a thick layer of chocolate and sprinkles. Clay stares at it longingly but doesn't get to for long because Darryl and Zak arrive shortly after.

["Let us](#) begin this meeting," Lavenza says, placing her book on her lap. "I do not have much time to speak with you all. Maintaining my existence in Montgomery's altered reality is no simple feat."

"Alright. Let's make this quick," Clay says. "What do you have for us?"

"I wish to speak to you regarding the true nature of her power. Tammy Montgomery, that is," Lavenza says. She dips her head. "Of course, there is some speculation on my part...but it is only to a small extent."

"Go on," Blade says.

"You see, it is likely that Tammy Montgomery has managed to change the cognition of the masses and the only rational conclusion we may draw from that is that she has meddled with Mementos."

"Mementos...I thought that place disappeared," Eret says, a hand on his chin.

"Yeah, how'd it come back?" Zak asks.

"I mean, the Meta-Nav is back and that Montgomery's Palace exists and all...so I wouldn't say that Mementos' return is anything unexpected," Floris says.

Lavenza clears her throat. "Essentially, Mementos is the cognition of the public given form. If Tammy Montgomery is truly capable of altering the cognition of every individual and if she were given access to Mementos..."

"Then he can use Mementos to alter everyone's cognitions and reality. Is that what you're saying?" George asks.

"Indeed," Lavenza says. "Let us call Tammy Montgomery's power 'actualization'. I strongly believe that this actualization is a power unique to her Persona."

"That thing was really a Persona..." Clay folds his arms.

Lavenza nods. "Determining when Tammy Montgomery first awakened to her power is impossible. However, when she had crossed paths with you, there was no doubt that she was already making use of that power. However, at that point in time, she could have been using it subconsciously..."

"She was already using her power in the real world?" Nick asks, words somewhat muffled from the doughnut in his mouth.

"Is she that powerful?" Floris mumbles.

Blade cuts in. "The counsellor has unique abilities like Clay's and George's. We still need to figure out how she used her power on Mementos as a whole, rather than a single individual."

"If her power is that great, then..." Darryl makes a noise of frustration. "But that's not something a single human can do! That's what gods can..." He stops midway. Realization dawns on the rest of the team.

"The God of Control!" Zak cries.

Lavenza hums. "The God of Control, Yaldabaoth, that you had defeated was merely a fake deity

that the masses had clung onto deludedly. It is easy to conclude that Tammy Montgomery has taken its place after it has been defeated.”

“Wait, so you’re saying like Dr Montgomery’s like some kind of god now?” Harvey asks.

“More like, society thinks of her that way,” Blade says.

“But that doesn’t make sense,” Clay says. “We defeated Yaldabaoth. As the Phantom Thieves. Shouldn’t the public turn to *us* instead of Dr Montgomery?”

Lavenza goes silent. Perhaps there is some truth, or some clue, that they had yet to grasp...

“We chose her,” Darryl says in a small voice. “Because we wanted that reality.”

“When some of us had gone for counselling,” George says. “I remember that she met up with Gina in Helen Park while you guys were in Hawaii.”

“So she used her counselling sessions to...to get information on what we wanted?” Eret’s face is a picture of shock.

“It seems that way,” Clay mutters.

“And she made me think that I was my brother,” Tubbo says, distraught, “because I wanted that.”

Lavenza clears her throat. “There is no way of knowing just how many incidents were orchestrated by that woman. However, the result is the same: the desire for actualization was seeded in your hearts. Thus, I have no doubts that it was your own desires that led to your actualization.”

What have they done? Clay bites his lip, not sure how to proceed.

“Well, if it’s our fault, then we’ve got to change it, right?” Floris says.

This perks the team up.

“Yeah, we’re not helping by moping about,” Harvey says with a pump of his fist. “Come on. We gotta kick some butt!”

Lavenza smiles. “In that case, let me continue. On the day that the God of Control fused Mementos with the world, the merging was undone through your efforts and thus the two worlds are attempting to return to their initial states.”

“The merging isn’t undone yet?” Clay asks.

“That’s why we saw the Doctor’s Palace even in the real world,” George says.

“Even as we speak, Tammy Montgomery is influencing the world in places where the boundaries are blurred. While the actualization may be slow, if he continues to actualize the world of masses as a whole, reality may merge with Mementos once more,” Lavenza explains. “When that happens, anyone trapped within the actualized world can never again awaken to the real one.”

“Wait, really?” Nick gapes.

“Indeed,” Lavenza says. “Even with your Personas, it would be next to impossible to defy Tammy Montgomery in a world which she controls completely. Essentially, when the worlds have merged, there will be no chance of success in your mission.”

“How long...how long do we have?” Clay asks.

“I would say...about a month,” Lavenza mumbles, voice nearly inaudible.

“A month.” Eret shakes his head. “We don’t have much time, in that case.”

“February the third was the Doctor’s deadline,” George says. “Could she have given us that time based on when her actualization would be completed?”

“Then we’ll just have to secure the infiltration route before then,” Floris says. “Do what we’ve always been doing.”

“Then on the day of February the third...we’ll have to steal Dr Montgomery’s heart,” Clay says. It’s likely that Dr Montgomery would stay within her Palace in order to tap into her Persona’s power to its fullest to complete her actualization. Therefore, they’d probably have to wait for her to contact them.

They’ll just have to take the time before that to carefully prepare for that day. They have no second chances, but when did they ever?

“Leave the calling card to me,” Zak says, grinning. “It’s our really-really-really final calling card, so I’m gonna make sure it’s a good one.”

“Is that all?” Clay asks.

George speaks up. “Well, there are still some unsolved questions...Why’s the Palace name like that?”

“It doesn’t seem to affect the app’s functions, though,” Eret says.

Right. The Palace Ruler’s name had been replaced by a bunch of unintelligible characters and symbols. Even now, Dr Montgomery’s name is still censored.

“It is likely to be a product of Tammy Montgomery’s cognition,” Lavenza says. “As long as she permits your existence, your method of infiltration will not entirely disappear either. However, in her heart, she feared that you would steal her Treasure, and hence that feeling took the Palace Ruler’s name away from you.”

“But why doesn’t this Doctor just actualize us out of existence entirely?” Blade asks.

“Maybe that’s just how Dr Montgomery does things,” Darryl says.

“She wants to save us,” Tubbo agrees. “We do mutually benefit from her actualization. Or that’s what she thinks.”

“If we’re all caught up to speed, then we can begin the infiltration tomorrow,” Floris says. “Sounds good?”

Everyone agrees unanimously and the matter is settled.

Lavenza turns to face Clay. “I will continue to watch over you, Trickster.”

With that and a flash of light, Lavenza takes the shape of a butterfly once more and leaves out the window.

Tomorrow, they will begin their infiltration. They will steal Dr Montgomery’s heart for sure. Her

plans for actualization must be stopped.

*

1/11 – MONDAY – EVENING

“Hey.”

“What’s wrong?” Clay is lying on his stomach, scrolling through Reddit while munching on chips. Floris moves to sprawl on Clay’s back, tiny nose digging into his neck.

“I haven’t really apologized yet. I was stupid and wanted to stay a human so much that I just... kinda ignored you.”

“You don’t have to apologize. The one who’s at fault here is Dr Montgomery,” Clay says, rolling onto his back. Floris yelps and leaps off, his tail almost crushed under Clay.

“But still. It’s like...it looked like I didn’t trust you. So...I’m sorry,” Floris says with a sigh.

“Well, you’re fighting with us now, right?”

Floris smiles at that. “Yeah. You know what? I don’t need to be a human to be awesome. I’m cool enough as it is.”

“That’s the spirit.”

“Oh, and...uh...thanks for snapping me out of it. Really appreciate it,” Floris says.

For a moment, Clay can see another shape flickering behind Floris. No longer is Mercurius looming defensively, even *mischievously*, over Floris. A more muscular Persona takes its place, clad in shining armour with a sword in hand. Diego nods in acknowledgement and fades away, sinking and merging with Floris’ soul.

“Well, we’ve got a long day ahead of us tomorrow,” Floris says with a yawn. “Let’s get some sleep.”

“I’ve got chips to finish. Want some?” Clay asks, holding up the bag. Floris shakes his head and yawns again.

Clay’s phone buzzes as Floris settles beside him, curled up beside his head once more. There is a single text message from George with only two words.

George: Good night

Clay can hardly suppress the grin on his face as he texts George back with way more emoticons than necessary. George has never done this before, so this sets a new precedence.

Clay plugs his phone into the charger and lays down to sleep. With his heart full and happy that night, he falls into a deep, deep slumber.

Chapter End Notes

why fundy calls lavenza "lady" is because she's a being older + more powerful than

him and they're both technically denizens of the velvet room

faith arcana rank 5 -> 6 (tubbo)

justice arcana rank 6 -> 8 (tricksters of justice)

Knowledge +2 (answering question correctly)

Laboratory of Sorrow: Infiltration Begin

Chapter Summary

the hunt for an ID card and reaching a roadblock

Chapter Notes

cherny has uploaded a Russian translation of this fic! Will link this in the fic's summary and in the Author's Notes when i finally reach the end of the fic!

Link: <https://ficbook.net/readfic/10203786/26255896>

i hated fafnir. high defense and repels like phys and gun and forcing me to use magic skills...

also dream's "face" reveal...

1/12 – TUESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“I heard you guys have codenames,” Tubbo says. The elevator car whirrs as it carries the Thieves up into Montgomery’s Palace. “Do I need a codename too?”

“I mean, you could,” Dream says.

“We could just continue calling you Tubbo, though,” Fundy says, “since Tubbo isn’t exactly your real name.”

“Like mine,” Eret says.

“Wait. Eret’s not your real name?” Tubbo sounds surprised.

“No.” Eret chuckles. “It’s not.”

“Oh.” Tubbo nods slowly. “I’m good with Tubbo, honestly.”

“Then Tubbo it is.”

The elevator’s doors open and the Thieves step out into the main lobby. Is it just Dream or are there more cognitive beings gathered here? If so, that must mean that Dr Montgomery’s influence is growing at an alarming rate.

“Fundy, Sapnap, Techno, you’re with me,” Dream says. “Everyone else, you’re part of the backup team.”

“The backup team?” Tubbo asks.

“Basically, we deal with minor Shadows so that the main team can focus on the stronger enemy,”

Skeppy says.

“But we might need to switch out with people from the main team sometimes, so don’t get too comfortable,” TapL says.

“Just keep a distance from the main team,” Bad says.

Tubbo looks confused but hangs back with the rest of the team while Dream and the others push on ahead, passing through the lobby and heading up the staircase that led to the second auditorium. According to Navi, there is a pathway that leads further into the Palace accessible from that location.

The journey to the auditorium doesn’t take long. The benches are now filled with cognitive beings, their attention drawn to the holographic presentation in the middle of the room where the throne used to be. It’s strange, but the Phantom Thieves are totally ignored when passing through the room. It’s as if the cognitive beings aren’t seeing them at all.

The pathway that Navi mentions leads them down another narrow corridor decorated with statues in the shape of hearts, as well as golden ornaments strung across the walls. At the very end of the corridor lies a door which, unfortunately, has a glaring red sign with the words “Authorised Personnel Only” printed across it in bold, black lettering.

Signs have never stopped the Thieves before, but ID card readers have. Dream huffs in frustration.

“Looks like we’re going to have to find the Shadow that has the key,” Navi says, studying his map. There are two doorways to their left and to their right, each leading to two halls which look exactly the same.

“Then let’s split up and search,” Dream says. “Navi, you can facilitate long-distance conversation, right?”

“Yeah.” Navi nods. “Only with Eret, though, because only Prometheus is strong enough to receive my signal.”

“In that case, we’ll split into groups of five,” Dream says. “Fundy, Sapnap, Navi and Tubbo will come with us. Everyone else will go the other route.”

There is no dispute amongst the Thieves as the two groups head on through the separate doorways.

The hall is bigger than Dream thought it was. There are many cognitive beings milling about, the most that Dream has seen since Singh’s Palace. The hall is way too big to be able to investigate every nook and cranny without getting spotted.

Avoiding the numerous Shadows turns out to be harder than Dream anticipated, from one sweeping glance of the chamber. There isn’t much cover which they can hide behind and starting a battle in this hall will likely draw the attention of many more Shadows...

Wait a minute.

Instead of going to the Shadow, why not make the Shadow come to them? If conflict attracts more Shadows, then the louder the commotion, the better.

“That’s a crazy idea,” Sapnap says, then shrugs. “But I’m down for that.”

“When you need to escape, I should be able to buy some time for you,” Navi says, “as long as you

stay near the exit.”

Sounds good. Tubbo chews on his lip nervously.

“Just stay close to us and you’ll be fine,” Dream says.

Tubbo nods. “Okay.”

Dream spies a Shadow walking past them, utterly oblivious as to their existence. He draws his pistol and fires a single shot at it. The gunshot tears through the air, the bullet lodged in the Shadow’s arm. The Shadow screams and drops its clipboard, head snapping in the direction of the Thieves.

Upon seeing them, the Shadow burst into a giant teddy bear ripped at the seams, ominous skulls peeking out instead of stuffing. Dream raises a hand and the team moves out.

Navi hovers above them, scanning the enemy with a sharp green beam while Sapnap and Fundy surround it.

“It’s Bugs. Weak to Frei. Don’t use Psi or Ei skills!” Navi shouts. “It doesn’t have the ID!”

Well then, they’re just going to have to battle Shadow after Shadow until they chance upon the enemy holding it. Fundy summons Diego and Sapnap summons Seiten Taisei, sending sickles of green and bolts of electricity at the teddy bear.

Bugs laughs, launching itself into the air. Fundy’s wind blades and Sapnap’s electricity ram into each other, creating a massive thunderstorm that take out cognitive beings one after another. It’s too bad, though, that Dream is waiting for it to do just that, firing a bullet charged with nuclear power right at Bugs. Bugs screeches as it disintegrates into ash.

“More and more Shadows are coming. I still don’t sense the ID...” Navi mutters. Necronomicon supports them with a cloak of green, healing up their wounds.

Already, several red pitchfork-wielding demons have arrived, roaring threateningly as they rush the Thieves. From the other direction comes a couple of Byakhee, wings barely moving as they soar through the air.

“Tubbo! With me!” Dream spins on his heels and runs in the direction of the incoming Byakhee. “Sapnap, Fundy, focus on the demons!”

He switches out to Sraosha and spears down several Byakhee with pillars of light. Tubbo follows his example and takes down several Byakhee himself. He moves just like a dancer, or a gymnast, tumbling and rolling like he’s been doing it all his life.

Dream ducks, narrowly avoiding a fireball to the head. The fireball crashes into the wall behind him, fizzling out into harmless cinders. Tubbo stabs the last of the Byakhee through the chest, the foe’s ash washing over the battlefield.

Sapnap and Fundy seem to have taken care of the Belial on their side too.

The sudden rumbling of the floor nearly catches Dream off balance, throwing out his arms to keep on his feet.

“Something big’s coming,” Navi says. “Be careful!”

The “something big” appears to be a dragon of sorts with a skull for a head, its entire body decked out in steel armour with stripes of black. A red jewel is engraved in its chest in the shape of a diamond, glowing softly.

[The](#) dragon roars, turning its head and locking onto them. Its horns begin to glow with a frightening cyan colour.

“Look out!”

Before Dream and the others can react, Navi has already thrown up a shield, Necronomicon’s tentacles forming a wall between them and the dragon. The dragon’s beam pierces through the tentacles. Dream gasps as the beam punctures his shoulder, pain exploding from within. Not even Navi’s impenetrable shield can defend against that thing?

“Dream? Are you okay?” Tubbo and Fundy rush toward him.

“That’s...” Navi’s mutter is drowned out by the dragon’s roar. “That’s Fafnir, and it’s tough.”

No shit. Dream grits his teeth as Fundy knits his bone and skin back together. Fafnir readies another beam of cyan. Dream grasps Tubbo’s head and forces him down against the ground, the beam missing him by inches.

With how fast it manages to charge and fire such a powerful beam, Dream has no doubt that they’re in for a hard time. All they can do now is to continuously avoid its attacks while waiting for Navi’s scan.

“Repels Physical and Gun skills,” Navi says thoughtfully. “It absorbs Agi and Frei too...”

The earth rumbles again, and this time, Dream had *not* expected the ground to split, forming chasms and stalagmites with razor edges. He and Tubbo are on the same plot of land, while Sapnap and Fundy are on the other. They’re fine so far. The Fafnir didn’t get them...

“Dream! We’re tilting!”

Tubbo stands abruptly, hardly able to balance on the platform that continues to crumble, cracks forking the concrete. Dream grabs a stalagmite, the other hand on Tubbo’s wrist as the ground continues to crumble and split, threatening to drop them into the limitless abyss below.

“Tubbo! Grappling hook!” Dream yells.

Tubbo breathes are quick, his palm going sweaty as he fumbles with the hook. Dream’s jaw clenches as his hand begins to lose its grip on the stalagmite. A string of curses leaves Tubbo’s mouth as a beam of cyan crashes beside them. A millimetre nearer and it would have demolished Dream’s arm till it was nothing left.

“Dream! Tubbo! Hold on!” Sapnap’s cry is hardly audible through the rush of blood in Dream’s ears.

Dream’s arm screams in pain as he continues to slide further down the stalagmite.

“Come on...come on!” Tubbo snarls. Did the hook get stuck or someth-

The stalagmite breaks off.

Dream is sent tumbling through the air, his grip still deathly tight on Tubbo’s wrist.

“Dream!” Fundy shouts.

A gust of wind lifts them into the air the same moment Tubbo slams a fist on the button of the grappling hook contraption. The hook shoots out, clawing at the rocky surface of a piece of debris.

Dream jerks to a stop, but the subsequent scream from Tubbo has him glancing up in fear. Tubbo’s face is scrunched up in pain. Dream grabs an Ender Pearl from his coat pocket and hurls it up onto the platform that they’ve gotten a hold of.

He hauls Tubbo up, only realizing the severity of Tubbo’s dislocated shoulder. Tears are gathered in his eyes as Fundy jumps across platforms to them, paws outstretched, coated in wisps of green.

Sapnap grunts, deflecting a stray beam of cyan with his cudgel which crashes into a nearby wall. Dream squints at the current ensuing battle. George is doing battle with the Fafnir, Loki summoned and chakrams out, keeping it busy while they recover from the damage.

“You guys good? I’m gonna go help Navi,” Sapnap shouts. Without waiting for a response, he hops off further into the room, where weaker Shadows are beginning to gather.

“Tubbo. You stay here with Fundy,” Dream says.

“B-But I want to help!” Tubbo is still clutching his arm, rolling his shoulder.

“You’ll only hurt yourself!” Dream’s tone comes out harsher than he’d like. The silence is deafening, even louder than the din of combat. But now’s not the time to be worrying about this.

Dream produces an Ender Pearl from his coat and hurtles it through the air. The orb lands on the platform where Fafnir is, not once having moved from where it stood. Dream grabs his pistol, summoning Dionysus and charging the gun with a spark of electricity.

The bullet fired lodges itself in the side of Fafnir’s skull. Fafnir roars as cracks spider across its armour, tail sweeping and knocking Sapnap and Navi dangerously close to the edge.

It is at this moment that Fafnir triumphantly unleashes its earthquake-inducing attack again. The ground trembles and begins to fall away beneath their feet again.

Specifically Sapnap and Navi’s feet.

“Fuck!” Navi stumbles and falls backwards, body tumbling over the edge.

“Navi!” Dream dives for him, fingers barely missing his. He can hardly register the expression of pure terror on Navi’s face as he descends into the darkness below.

“Dream! Look out!”

Dream grunts as Sapnap crashes into him, the both of them narrowly dodging another cyan beam fired their way. He loses sight of Navi for just a moment and his heart is in his throat.

“No!” Dream shouts, shoving Sapnap off him and scrambling over to the edge. He can’t lose Navi. Not again. He’d rather die. “Navi!”

A flash of green blinds him, forcing Dream to throw his arms up to shield his eyes from the light. Rising from the chasm is Necronomicon with Navi safe within. A grappling hook snaps back against Tubbo’s wrist with the latter leaning over the edge, the panic still clear on his face.

Tubbo just saved Navi’s life.

“Pay attention, Dream!” Navi yells.

Sapnap dives between Dream and Fafnir to deflect its blast of cyan. With renewed spirits, Dream switches out to Black Frost, charging his gun with the chill of ice and fires one bullet straight at Fafnir. It turns its head at the right time and the bullet smashes into the same spot as the other did, its skull splintering, half of it shattering.

Fafnir bellows in pain.

“Dream! Its weak spot is its chest. The red jewel,” Navi says. “That’s where it’s keeping the ID too!”

The ID that they need. Dream almost forgot they are here for that. With only one horn left, Fafnir’s cyan blast appears weaker, burning less when it grazes Dream’s skin. It still stings but is less severe than before.

“Let’s do this, Dream!” Sapnap readies his cudgel, and Dream nods.

They run towards Fafnir from both directions, wielding a cudgel buzzing with electricity and a dagger infused with the power of ice. Fafnir glares at them, the red gem gleaming in the light.

“Now!” Navi shouts.

Fafnir’s tail comes flying. Both Sapnap and Dream leap over it, cudgel pulled back, dagger’s blade flying. Sapnap’s cudgel slams into its skull, smashing its second half, the impact spinning its body right where Dream wants it to be.

Dream stabs his dagger into the gem, watching with satisfaction as red beams of light shoot from its core. Fafnir screams, voice otherworldly, as it dissolves into dust.

[A card](#) plops onto the ground, and Dream bends down to pick it up. Navi, on the other hand, appears to be speaking to thin air, communicating with the other Thieves.

“Dream! Sapnap! Navi!”

Fundy scrambles onto the platform upon which they stand with Tubbo in tow.

“That’s the card!” Fundy cries with a wide grin, tail wagging.

Tubbo doesn’t say anything. He merely stares at the ground.

“I thought I was a goner,” Navi mutters, ending his conversation with Eret. “Tubbo barely gave me enough time to switch to Necronomicon.”

Tubbo saved Navi. Dream remembers that. The very same Tubbo that seems too afraid to even look at him. Dream’s heart clenches, remembering the way he had spoken to him.

“Tubbo,” Dream says, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Sorry...um...sorry about that. I didn’t mean to...”

“No, you’re right,” Tubbo says, still staring at his shoes. “I would have just been a liability.”

“You literally saved Navi’s life,” Sapnap says. “Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

Dream nods. “All this takes practice. We’ve been at it for so long and you’ve only just started.” He smiles. “You did really good, Tubbo.”

Tubbo beams. Whatever frown he's worn has disappeared, replaced by a warm smile.

"Eret and the others will meet us back at the door," Navi says. "Come on. Let's go back."

*

With the ID card pressed against the scanner, the door clicks open without a hitch. It swings inward, exposing a darkened room filled from floor to ceiling with crates and boxes stacked high on the shelves. This must be some kind of warehouse.

"There's a way further into the Palace at the other end," Navi says. "Come on."

The warehouse is large, lit only by rods of light affixed on the walls. Worker Shadows organizing and packing boxes are everywhere. Thankfully, with the help of darkness and boxes to hide themselves behind, they work their way through the warehouse easily.

Only one Shadow impedes their path to the door. Dream watches from a ledge above it, waiting for it to turn around, before sniping it with a single shot to the head. The Shadow bursts into ash with the successful assassination. Dream leaps from the ledge down onto the final platform. Taking the lead, he pushes the final door open, revealing a hallway so bright it's hard on the eyes.

"Safe room," Navi says. "Let's take a rest there."

[The](#) safe room is tucked away in the wall, distorted door practically beckoning them in. Its interior is essentially a locker room with a coffee table in the middle surrounded by couches. Dream's exhausted body melts like jelly onto the plushiness of the couch, closing his eyes and taking a well-earned break.

"How far are we into the Palace?" Dream hears Eret ask.

"I'd say around twenty per cent or so," Navi says.

"What?" Skeppy cries.

"Closer to twenty-five per cent, actually."

"Are Palaces usually this big?" Tubbo asks.

"Yeah." Navi's voice is closer to Dream now. The couch dips beneath an added weight. "But I'm sensing some kind of obstruction up ahead. We should at least check it out before leaving for today."

"Obstruction meaning the Shadow kind or...?" Techno trails off.

"Just a general roadblock," Navi says. "Like the one back at the casino."

"Not far from here, right?" Bad asks.

"No."

They rest up for a few more minutes before Dream announces that it's time to go. He looks up at Navi with a half-grin, reaching out a hand to him. Navi folds his arms and sighs, pulling Dream to his feet with a grunt of effort.

"Right then," Dream says, hand on the knob. "Let's go."

*

[The](#) next chamber, not far from the safe room, appears to be a control room of some sort, walls covered with monitors apart from the one on the far end, which is instead grown over with vines. No, not vines. Cables. And Dream knows where he's seen those before.

"This is our way forward," Navi says, laying his palm flat against the cable tentacles.

"Isn't it just a wall, though?" TapL asks.

"There's a hallway behind these cables," Techno says.

"Which means we have to find a way to get rid of these cables," Fundy mumbles.

"But they don't exist in the real world," Dream says, reminded of the other roadblocks they've encountered. The lasers in Marion's Palace had been deactivated by opening the near-impregnable door in her house. Gina's Palace's roadblock had been bypassed by convincing her to let them into her room. Mrs Armstrong's Palace's High Limit floor was reachable by gaining access to a courtroom.

All their roadblocks had been circumvented by manipulating the real world because their causes *had* been in the real world.

"This is a monitoring room, isn't it?" Eret says, inspecting the monitors. The screens depict public areas such as the town centre, Valentine Hills, as well as other prominent locations like Bowarrow Street and Pointe Boulevard. Dream even notices a monitor displaying the entrance to Enderlands High. There's no doubt that Dr Montgomery is making use of this room to keep an eye on the general public, to "help" actualize their desired reality.

"How is she doing that, though?" Tubbo wonders. "We didn't see anything like that in the school."

He raises a good point.

"Well, there's only one way that she can keep track of the general public's cognitions at once," Fundy says. "And that's Mementos."

"Mementos?" Realization dawns on the group. Lavenza had mentioned it the day before, about how Dr Montgomery is attempting to fuse Mementos with the real world once again. Perhaps she has infiltrated Mementos to gather information about what the reality each individual wants.

"It's worth a shot," Dream says, nodding. "We'll come back once we've dealt with the cables."

The team agrees. They head back to the safe room and exit the Palace from there, using their grappling hooks to abseil down the side of the laboratory. Once each member is safely on the ground, Dream reaches into his phone and activates the Meta-Nav.

"Returning to the real world. Thank you for your hard work."

*

[1/12 – TUESDAY – EVENING](#)

Clay flops onto his bed, pooped from their day in the Palace. They'd have to find some time to go down into Mementos and try to figure out how to remove the cables.

Nick grabs his clothes and towel and is out of the room, headed to the bathroom for a quick

shower. Clay rolls onto his side, noticing the light on his phone indicative of new messages.

The first is from Darryl, asking whether he can speak to him tomorrow after school. Clay replies with an affirmative response.

The second is from Tubbo, apologizing again for the day's events, promising that he'd do better. Clay assures him that he's done well today and that he should get some rest.

The third is from George, one that puts a silly smile on Clay's face.

George: Good night

Clay fires off a good night message to him as well and sinks into his pillow. Floris huffs good-naturedly, tucking his snout even deeper into Clay's pillow.

Promises

Chapter Summary

between infiltration chap

Chapter Notes

3rd tier personas incoming !

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

1/13 – WEDNESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“So, why’d you want to see me?”

Darryl’s room is as neat as Clay remembers. Zak is out today, to procure some art supplies, apparently. Darryl takes a deep breath, eyes cast on the carpet.

“I have to apologize,” Darryl says, a hand on his nape. “About the whole not-remembering thing.”

“The...what?”

“I wanted to let go of the past year so easily,” Darryl says. “I wanted to forget about Mr Krones, and what he did to me and Adrian.”

“It’s not your fault,” Clay says. “I think anyone would have wanted to forget.”

“But when you tried to tell me about it, I wanted to ignore what you were saying,” Darryl says, “because I knew there was some truth in the memories that came back.”

“You still chose to remember,” Clay says with a smile, “and that’s all that matters.”

Darryl beams. “I...Thank you, Clay. I promise that I’ll get even stronger. For the Thieves, for Adrian and for you.”

Clay watches as Darryl’s new Persona flickers behind him. Instead of Hecate, Celestine watches Clay as she chews on gum, long scarlet hair highlighted with blue and yellow streaks whipping around her head. She disappears, forming a sphere of light which merges with Darryl’s soul.

Clay heads home straight after with the waning sun to his back.

*

1/13 – WEDNESDAY – EVENING

Zak: can we meet tomorrow

Zak: I need to talk to you

Me: sure

*

George: Good night

Me: Good night !! :)

*

1/14 – THURSDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“What’s this about?” Clay asks, leaning against the railing, standing at the deck overlooking the lake at Helen Park. It’s so peaceful, what with the tiny little boats still bobbing on the water. The air is frigid despite the lack of wind. Clay tilts his head, watching Zak immersed in his sketches. Did he come at a wrong time? Then again, it’s *Zak* who invited him.

“Well, it’s...about...” Zak mutters absently. “Wait. Give me a few seconds.”

Clay sighs.

“Done!” Zak finishes his final stroke with a flourish and closes his sketchpad, tucking it under his arm. “Okay, okay. What did you want to talk about?”

“*You* were the one who called me here!”

“Oh! Oh, right!” Zak nods vigorously. “I forgot.”

How does one forget something like that?

“So, um...” Zak scratches his head, obviously embarrassed. “I just wanted to say that I’m really sorry.”

“About?”

“Um...” Zak blinks. “About wanting to accept that new reality. The one where the real Sylvaria was displayed in public, and living under my Master and stuff...” He puts his hands together and bows low. “I’m very, very, *very* sorry. Like, a thousand times sorr-“

“It’s alright,” Clay says, grabbing his shoulder. If he doesn’t stop Zak now... “I forgive you.”

Zak looks up, a mischievous grin on his face. “Oh my God. Darryl told me you were forgiving but I didn’t think that it’d be *this* easy.”

Clay resists the urge to sock him across the face.

“No, but seriously. Thanks for pulling me out from that,” Zak says. “If you hadn’t made me think hard about...about the stuff we endured, the experiences...I think I would have stayed in that reality. So I’ve decided! I’m gonna invest all my strength into stealing Dr Montgomery’s heart!”

Clay nods, the brightness of his smile mirroring Zak’s. As with Darryl and Floris, a faint shape hovers behind him. Instead of a storm-summoning god, Kamu Susanoo has now evolved into a Persona wearing a flamboyant shocking pink jacket, a fanciful boa wrapped around his neck, with a sword in hand in the shape of a cigar. Gorokichi grunts, and Clay dips his head in respect. Gorokichi vanishes, leaving behind a sphere of light that descends and fuses with Zak’s soul.

“Well, there’s that,” Zak says. “Do you wanna stay and be my model or something?”

Clay is about to decline but he stops himself and sighs. Oh, why the hell not?

*

1/14 – THURSDAY – EVENING

Tubbo: Hello! Are you free tomorrow?

Tubbo: I wuld like someone to speak to just someone who knows about Thomas and me

Me: Yeah I’m free

Me: where do you want to meet?

*

George: Good night

Me: Nights!!!!

*

1/15 – FRIDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“This looks like a good place to talk,” Tubbo says, glancing around. It isn’t too cold today – not cold enough to snow. The school’s rooftop should be off-limits, but with Eret’s permission, Clay believes that they won’t get into trouble.

Being up here brings back vivid memories of when they had been starting out as the Phantom Thieves. It had been him, Floris, Nick and Darryl going up against Peter Krones, the king of his own castle. Clay and Tubbo settle against a couple of unused classroom desks and chairs.

“What did you want to talk about?” Clay asks, fingers clasped.

“I’d like to sort out my thoughts,” Tubbo says. “You know, about Thomas.”

“Your brother.”

Tubbo nods, eyes going glassy. “Yeah.”

Clay waits for him to continue, not wanting to pressure him.

“Thomas was my role model. He was always the better coder, honestly. He called it a team effort, but most of the time, he’s the one who helps our team nab the win,” Tubbo says, staring up at the sky. “After we’d win competitions, he’d always treat me to ice cream.”

“He was really smart, huh?”

Tubb nods. “I wanted to be more like him, you know. Since he’s smart and strong and cheerful. I always played second fiddle to him.”

“I’m sure you’re amazing on your own, Tubbo,” Clay says.

“Thomas was an inspiration to me, though,” Tubbo says, perking up. “He made me want to try harder, to want to be like him. Maybe he...” Tubbo trails off. “He made me want to *be* him.”

The silence that passes is reflective, pensive. It had been the reality that Tubbo had been living for so long under Dr Montgomery's spell. Tubbo had lived his life as Thomas, the twin who was better at coding, better at being cheerful. Better than everything, in Tubbo's opinion.

"Do you still want to be him?" Clay asks, watching as the first snowflakes drift from the sky.

[Tubbo](#) shakes his head. "Not anymore. I want to live as myself. As my own person. If I have flaws, then I just have to put in more effort to improve myself."

Clay smiles. It had taken Tubbo some time, caused him quite a lot of pain along the way, but he's got here. He's cast aside that convenient reality, cast aside that identity that he had been clinging to like a drowning man would straws.

"That's all I wanted to talk to you about," Tubbo says, placing a hand over his chest, as if he's lifted a weight.

"In that case, since there's still some time left before evening..." Clay says, looking over at the sun. It's still three in the afternoon, but the sun looks like it's about to head home past the hills for today. "Do you want to go get some ice cream, Tubbo?"

At that, Tubbo's face lights up. It's only now, when he sees Tubbo's eyes with that sparkle, that he realizes just how dull they had been when they first met. When Tubbo still believed that he was Thomas.

"Okay!" Tubbo slings his bag over his shoulder, skipping over to the staircase, humming some strange ice cream song. Clay sticks his hands in his pockets and follows him back down into the school building.

That crepe place over at Valentine's sold ice cream, if Clay remembers correctly.

*

[1/15 – FRIDAY – EVENING](#)

Zak: yo

Zak: we're infiltrating tomorrow right

Eret: yes

Eret: unless our leader says otherwise

Me: yeah we're infiltrating tmrw

Zak: ok great

Tubbo: where are we going?

Nick: Mementos

Nick: it's a scary place

Nick: but not too scary just dark

Tubbo: oh

Me: don't worry it's not that dark

Me: and it's Eret driving

Tubbo: DRIVING?

Eret: there's nothing to fear

Eret: I've never crashed into anything

Techno: my life flashed before my eyes once

Darryl: o.O

Tubbo: oh

Me: it's fine

Me: just hang on tight and you'll be fine

Tubbo: this is not inspiring a lot of confidence right now

Floris laughs. "Eret just makes a lot of sharp turns, but he's a pretty safe driver. Better than you, anyway."

Clay huffs as he taps on another chatlog.

George: Good night

He smiles and fires back his own good night message before placing his phone back on the shelf. Perhaps he should hang out with George sometime after the next infiltration. Take him to the arcade? Have a quiet walk around Pointe Boulevard or even Chinatown? The possibilities are endless.

They can just hang out as friends. As long as he gets to spend time with George. Clay drapes his duvet over himself and Floris and is lulled into a deep, deep sleep.

*

Chapter End Notes

faith arcana rank 6 -> 7 (tubbo)

The Wither

Chapter Summary

p5r new mementos area

Chapter Notes

i almost died of laughter when i was watching tommys vid on the size changer mod i literally couldnt breathe

1/16 – SATURDAY – DAYTIME

“This is...”

Dream steps out from the Path of Iweleth, the path that led to the depths of Mementos. He’d been expecting guard Shadows, depressed Shadows locked up in cages, the flashes of red and black giving him a headache...However, he’s not met with any of these.

Instead, Mementos depths has been carved out and removed. All that remains is a broken, devastated shrine glowing softly with blue pixie lights beneath them. It’s a long way down, the end of the abyss hardly visible.

“Ender Pearls,” Navi says. “The grappling hook isn’t long enough.”

Dream nods, digging out his Pearl and urging the other Thieves to do the same. He drops the Pearl, the murky orb plunging into the chasm. Dream closes his eyes and awaits the inevitable dizziness.

Dream blinks rapidly to chase the dizziness away. The other Thieves have made it down in one piece as well. Dream glances around. This is familiar...too familiar, in fact.

“This is where we fought the Holy Grail,” Sapnap says.

“The Holy Grail?” Navi and Tubbo ask in unison.

That name really washes Dream over with a wave of nostalgia. It had been only several weeks since that battle against Yaldabaoth, when Mementos had almost fused with the world the first time. Now that the Holy Grail is gone, the Hall of Grail looks especially...empty. Save for the trailing lines of blue cables curled around the stone of the shrine.

“Look!”

Bad points to an escalator that lies at the other end of the hall, similar to the ones at every platform. Instead of going down, this one goes up.

“That’s the new area,” Navi says. His eyes follow the cables which stretch up along the walls, hugging the escalator’s steps. “I think what we need to find is up there.”

With a wave of his hand, Dream leads his team up the escalator, headed for the new Path of Da'at.

*

[“Hold](#) on tight!”

Eret makes a sharp swerve, Fundy's tyres screeching as they round a particularly tight bend. Dream is thrown against Fundybus' door, slamming his head against the glass of the window. He can almost hear his brains rattling within his skull.

The Wither is on their tail, firing off blackened, rotting skulls against the walls, the train tracks... everywhere it can reach. Dream *has* to blame it on that pack of Byakhee earlier which refused to let them go.

“Platform's on the right!” Navi yells.

The Fundybus swerves once more and Dream is tossed against the Fundybus again. Screams erupt from the audience in the back seats. The platform is in plain sight but they're not out of the woods yet. Thankfully, the other, weaker Shadows are dispersing as soon as they notice the Wither and its explosive skulls.

“Get out! Now, now, now!” Fundy screeches as the Thieves scramble out of the Fundybus and onto the platform. Navi leads the way, hopping down the escalator two steps at a time with Tubbo following closely behind. Dream waits for Sapnap and Fundy, the last two to leap onto the platform and the trio scream as a skull smashes into the ceiling above them.

“Holy...Run!” Dream grabs Sapnap's wrist and drags him down the escalator, the latter tripping and falling, taking Dream down with him.

Rolling down an escalator is not a pleasant experience.

The duo ends up at the bottom of it, in a rest stop, safe from the Wither, bodies covered in cuts and gashes from the tumble. Fundy jumps off the escalator's handrail, shrouding them in green light and removing their pain.

“Get *off* me,” Sapnap mutters, rolling onto his back and forcing Dream off. Dream huffs, brushing dirt from his coat. His beautiful, emerald coat.

[“Let's](#) take a rest,” TapL says. “That took a lot out of me.”

Tubbo glances inquiringly at the other Thieves. “What *was* that?”

“The Wither,” Fundy says, breathless.

“A strong enemy that shows up if we stay in one area too long,” Techno says. “I think we're strong enough to take it, but these guys have zero points of courage.”

Dream sighs. “We're just playing safe. Look, I think we're risking death way too often now.”

“I'm kinda surprised we're all still alive, honestly,” Skeppy says, leaning back against the wall.

Dream flops into the seat beside Navi, who's inspecting the holographic map of Mementos.

“We're at the tenth area in Da'at,” Navi says. Ah. The Path of Da'at. Instead of being splashed with red and black like how every area of Mementos up till now has been, the Path of Da'at is a greyish, whitewashed colour. The black remains, but the striking red has been replaced with an empty

white.

Dream doesn't know which is worse.

"How long more do we have to go?" Dream asks, peering over his shoulder.

"Five more areas," Navi says, "then we'll reach the monitoring room."

"The monitoring room?"

"At the end of the Path." Navi dismisses the map. "I think that's where we need to go."

Dream lets the Thieves rest for a while longer, each wrapped up in conversation. When they're good to go, injuries healed, they set off down the escalator, headed for its depths.

*

["Dude](#), is it just me..." Sapnap pants, grabbing his kneecaps as he bends over. "Is it just me or is the Wither..."

"It's not just you." Fundy looks like he's about to keel over and die right there and then. Well, Dream can't blame him. Fundy's been their main mode of transportation.

Jokes aside, Dream has to agree with the two of them. The Wither *has* been appearing more and more frequently the deeper down, or rather, the further through the Path of Da'at they go. Does Dr Montgomery have something to do with it? Has she aggravated the guardian of Mementos?

"Anyway, let's get this done and over with." Navi gets to work, fiddling with the control panel that stretches across the entire wall at the far end, Tubbo right beside him, clearly interested.

Dream takes to watching the monitors while he waits. These monitors are no different from the ones in Dr Montgomery's Palace. However, they do not display various places in the real world, but rather that of Mementos. Most of the camera feed is labelled. Path of Adyeshach, Path of Qimranut, Path of Sheriruth...

[A sudden](#) gunshot has Dream snapping to attention and glancing around. The entire place is shaking as if an earthquake has just hit them. Another explosion has Dream assuming a battle stance, shoulders tensed.

"What was that?" TapL shouts, his fingers tightening around the grip of his axe.

Dream has heard those explosions one too many times. But how? How can it follow them here?

"Dream, I'm going to need you to keep it distracted long enough for me to finish this," Navi says, fingers flying across the keyboard.

The Wither shrieks, emerging from the escalator in true Wither fashion, charcoal skulls flying from its body, crashing into the walls and exploding upon contact. One blows up right next to him, spraying up a cloud of dust. Strangely enough, the cables and monitors remain intact.

"You totally jinxed us!" Skeppy cries, unsheathing his katana. "Now we actually have to fight this thing!"

"That is the mark of laziness. Think of it as exercise," Techno says, drawing his ray gun.

"You're one to talk!" Eret drops to the ground, narrowly avoiding a skull that sails over his head.

Dream summons Alice, casting a wave of darkness that pulses towards the Wither, forcing it back against the escalator. Fundy and Sapnap run around its back, preparing for their signature thunderstorm. TapL and Bad counter every skull shot their way with grenades and fireballs that match the intensity of the explosives.

“Flash bomb! Now!” Dream shouts.

Skeppy raises a hand and smashes the balls of ice to the ground, each releasing the sphere of light trapped within. The light blinds the Wither and it roars, firing off skulls which explode against the crumbling ground.

A bright flash of blue catches Dream’s eye as the Wither unleashes its pent-up fury, a dome of white tinged with blue expanding and consuming everything in its wake apart from the cables and the monitors.

“Holy shit!” Sapnap leaps away, nursing his burned arm which had gotten too close to the sphere of energy. That is one powerful Megidolaon, nothing like Dream has ever seen before. Is the Wither that inherently powerful?

“Navi! How long more?” TapL yells, firing off another grenade shell at one of the Wither’s skulls. Another one whizzes by his head, almost exploding in his face.

“About...I don’t know! It’s taking fucking forever!” Navi snarls, voice barely audible over the commotion. Tubbo is helping him, disabling the cables using another control panel beside Navi’s one.

Sapnap and Fundy conjure a thunderstorm, raging the battlefield, the cyclones bouncing off the cables and headed straight for the Wither. The cables seem to repel any sort of attack, no matter whether it is cast from Wither or Persona. Can they use that to their advantage somehow?

Dream summons Alilat, sending spears of ice that stab the Wither from below, hoping to impede its movements. He gasps, rolling away to avoid the breath of flames spewed from the Wither’s mouth. What was that? Has it just changed its attack pattern?

A growing sphere of cyan drops from above as Techno circles the room atop Anat, wings outspread. The Wither roars, one of its skulls glowing a bright pink as it stops the nuclear bomb in its tracks, reflecting the cyan bomb onto TapL.

TapL screams as the bomb slams into him, flinging him halfway across the room and against several monitors, which, apparently, remain unscratched.

“TapL!” Fundy runs over, healing magic at the tips of his paws. Bad covers him, keeping up the pressure with a barrage of fireballs that the Wither’s third head counters with lances of ice spearing up from the ground.

Just as Dream thought. The Wither seems to be intelligent enough to recognize their elemental affinities from their attacks alone, then coming up with the most efficient strategy to target their weaknesses. If so, then the Wither is the most dangerous enemy they’ve encountered up to date.

But just like any dangerous enemy, they will find a way to surpass it and come out on top as long as they retain their synergy.

The Wither releases yet another bout of Megidolaon, one that Dream isn’t ready for. Its speed and power seem to have increased exponentially, ravaging the walls and leaving craters in the floor. Dream winces as he heals his gutted torso, the cooling spread of Diarahan relieving in this

situation.

“Is it just me...or is it healing itself?” Skeppy is already out of breath, hands shaking.

Dream gulps, realizing that Skeppy’s right. Despite the fact that they’ve been doing their best to wear it down, the Wither does not even have a spot of damage on it.

“And I...I’m...” Sapnap gulps air, a hand on his heaving chest. “I’m feeling goddamn...tired...”

Is it...Dream takes a shaky breath. It has to be. The Wither has been draining their energy the whole time to heal itself! As the fight drags on, it’s only going to get harder and harder to fight, but Navi...

“Seventy-five per cent!” Tubbo shouts.

All that...only for seventy-five per cent? Dream isn’t sure how much longer they can last.

“Watch out!”

Eret shoves Techno away from an incoming ball of Psidyne, the ball of pink crashing into a wall. Debris rains from above as the place continues to collapse, piece by piece.

Dream switches to Sraosha, summoning pillars of light that keep the Wither in one position while Sapnap and Skeppy rain blows upon it from above, weapons coated with the power of electricity and ice. Yet, it is easy to tell from their sluggish movements, the fizzle of their elements, that they’re exhausted and it’s only a matter of time before...

The Wither surrounds itself with a cloak of blue, and Dream hops backwards, soles of his shoes scrabbling against the gravel of the debris. It’s going to attack them with that...that powerful Megidolaon again! From the looks of it, the consequences are not going to be pretty.

“Get back! Everyone get back!” Fundy screams.

Dream braces himself, summoning his hardest Persona and praying that they won’t get blown to smithereens immediately. He squeezes his eyes shut, arms thrown up in a pathetic attempt at defence. The Wither shrieks, explosive skulls flying and crashing into walls.

“Done!”

The Wither shrieks again, this time, the sound even more high-pitched, piercing Dream’s eardrums. He can see the bright flash of light from behind his lids. He isn’t sure what to expect. Pain? Agony? Or...nothing?

Dream cracks open an eye, gaping when he sees a barrier of green tentacles coiled around blue cables, crackling with sparks and completely shielding the Thieves from the attack.

“That was too close,” Tubbo wipes at the sheen of sweat glistening on his forehead.

“Dream! Quick! Use the Goho-M!” Navi shouts from overhead, voice strained. Necronomicon’s tentacles shiver, its grip on the blue cables loosening as Navi’s strength is sapped.

Dream doesn’t need telling twice. He smashes the smoke bomb on the ground, letting the smoke envelope them and whisk them back to the entrance of Mementos.

[“Returning](#) to the real world. Thank you for your hard work.”

“I told you...we couldn’t...” Nick can’t quite catch his breath, leaning against the railing of the station. “We couldn’t take it...”

“Maybe if we came a little more prepared...” Blade says.

Clay sighs. “Let’s just drop it.” The Wither is obviously not meant to be beaten. In any case, they’ve done what they had to do and removed the obstacle from the Palace.

“We should get through it as soon as possible and find a safe room on the other end, in case the cables come back,” Darryl says.

Eret rolls his shoulder. “Then shall we go in tomorrow?”

Harvey’s glare screams “murder”. “Are you joking?”

Clay checks the date on his phone. It’s the sixteenth. Given that the fight against the Wither was extremely taxing today, they’d probably need a couple of days to recover...

“How about Wednesday?” Clay suggests. Besides, he’s got to go find Phil for some weapon upgrades as well. “We don’t have much time before February the third, and we have to send the calling card by the second.”

“And we have a long way to go,” George says. “I’d say we have about seventy per cent of the Palace left unexplored.”

Floris groans.

Clay claps his hands together. “Good job everyone. Let’s head back home and get some rest. We’ll meet back here on Wednesday.”

The Thieves disperse after several tired goodbyes. Clay is about to follow Nick down the escalator to the station when someone grasps his shoulder. It’s Eret.

“Would it be possible to make time for me tomorrow? I’ve got something to...to talk to you about.”

Clay blinks. “Yeah. Sure. Tomorrow’s Sunday. No school, no nothing.”

“Glad to hear that,” Eret says, nodding. “I text you about this later. I’ve got some errands to run.”

With that, he rushes off. Nick calls from the foot of the escalator, threatening to leave him behind if he doesn’t hurry. Well, at least he knows what he’s going to be doing tomorrow.

*

[1/16 – SATURDAY – EVENING](#)

George: are you okay

George: the wither fight looked intense

Me: im good

Me: it was nothing :)

George: oh

George: okay then

George: good night

Me: good night!!

Renewal of Faith

Chapter Summary

more 3rd tier personas :) + tubbo social link

Chapter Notes

i wanted to post this earlier but ao3 was down for quite a while lol

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

1/17 – SUNDAY – DAYTIME

“What did you want to talk about?” Clay asks, although he already has an idea as to what he’s about to hear.

“About Dr Montgomery’s...temporary hold on me,” Eret says. They’re seated in the diner at Valentine’s, the place terribly full during lunchtime. Clay sips at his iced chocolate as they wait for the food to be served.

“I admit that I was captivated by the idea of...acceptance, no matter how real it is,” Eret says, shaking his head. “If not for your efforts, I would have remained in that false reality. I must thank you, and apologize to you.”

“No, no. It’s fine,” Clay says, flashing him a reassuring smile. “It’s not your fault.”

“It might as well be,” Eret says. He looks up as his salad arrives, covered in generous dollops of Caesar dressing. He thanks her.

“Well...what matters is what you do from here on out, right?” Clay says. His food arrives right then, lasagne bursting with cheese and meat.

Eret hums, corner of his lips stained with sauce. He dabs at it with a napkin. “I promise you. I will do my best for the Thieves, and I will lend you as much of my strength as I can manage.”

Clay smiles, watching as a faint shape flickers behind Eret. It’s neither Robin Hood nor Prometheus, but a burly figure wielding the most intimidating of bows, clad in black garb. Hereward bows his head and fades away, transforming into a small sphere of light that fuses with Eret’s soul.

They have a hearty lunch, talking about everything and nothing at the same time. Before long, it’s time for them to go. Clay has another appointment in the evening, one that has his heart fluttering and ready to burst from his chest. He waves goodbye to Eret at the station and gets on the train bound for Beatty.

1/17 – SUNDAY – EVENING

“You’re good at this,” George says, watching as Clay wins the game for them, the dart stabbing the centre of the dartboard. The satisfying ding of the machine and the number “701” blinking on the scoreboard has Clay grinning triumphantly. He glances over at the clock on the wall.

“Our time’s almost up,” Clay says, turning back to George, who appears to be staring at the dartboard.

He snaps out of his trance. “Oh. Yeah. We should get something to eat.”

“There’s an Italian restaurant just past the alleyway if you want to try something different.”

George nods. “Fine by me.”

They pack their things up and head on over to the quaint little establishment, the tasty scent of spaghetti sauce and fresh pizza dough wafting from within. Clay has only come here once or twice with Nick, and the food’s not half bad. Perhaps he should try their seafood ravioli this time...

They get a table furthest from the entrance, affording them a good view of Beatty. It’s quiet at this time of the day. Most people are probably already home, preparing to head to work or to school the next day.

They place their orders, and Clay leans back against the seat, fingers clasped behind his head.

“Why do you look so smug?” A smirk dances on George’s lips.

Clay laughs, jabbing a thumb at himself. “I’m not. This is my normal face.”

“I’ve been with you far too long to know what your normal face looks like.”

Been with you. Clay’s shakes the wishful thoughts out of his head. “Yeah. We met in May this... no, *last* year.” It’s nearly been one full year already. “We should celebrate our one-year anniversary.”

“Anniversary?”

Clay stifles a splutter. “Friendship...anniversary?”

“Oh. Right.” George nods, not looking particularly affected. “But it’s not like I’ll...” He catches himself. “It’s not like you’ll be here anyway.”

“I can make time to come down during the weekend or something,” Clay says. “It’s not far from my town.”

“Right.”

“Really! It’s only a couple of hours if I drive, and I plan on getting my license once my probation is over,” Clay says. “I’ll drive up to your house in my new Porsche or something...”

“You? A Porsche?” George chuckles.

“Hey. Don’t underestimate me. You never know.”

Clay likes the way George laughs. It gives him hope. Renewed faith. Maybe, after everything’s over, they can really build their friendship from the ground up. No more lies, no more deceit.

They can be just Clay and George.

*

1/17 – SUNDAY – LATE NIGHT

George: good night clay

Me: good night :>

*

1/18 – MONDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“Is that...” Floris pokes his head out of Clay’s bag. “Is that Tubbo?”

Tubbo? What’s he doing here? Here being the underground mall in Valentine’s.

Clay cranes his neck, following Floris’ gaze. There’s no mistaking that mop of brown hair, but *what* is with that getup? Tubbo appears to be wearing some sort of flashy golden jacket with a leopard print pants, a pair of heart-shaped sunglasses completing the eccentric look.

“What’s he doing?” Floris mumbles. After an uncomfortable pause, he states the obvious. “Let’s go check on him.”

Tubbo notices their arrival as soon as they step into the shop. He waves to them enthusiastically.

“Clay! What brings you here?” Tubbo asks.

“Picking something up for Darryl,” Clay says, holding up a plastic bag by way of explanation.

“I see.” Tubbo nods. He looks down at himself. “What do you think?”

Clay bites his lip, trying to find the best way to go about telling him. “It looks...unique.”

“Right,” Tubbo says, uncertainty creeping into his voice. “You see, I wanted to find my own style. Most of my clothes weren’t picked out by me. It was mostly Thomas, or my mom. That’s why I’m...here.”

“It’s a little *too* unique,” Floris quips.

“I was thinking that too...” Tubbo trails off, tugging on the hem of his jacket.

“Well, let’s get you changed back and we’ll see what we can do about it,” Clay says, placing a hand on his shoulder. Tubbo complies, emerging from the changing room in his Enderlands uniform. He returns the articles of clothing to the sales clerk.

“I really don’t think that was your kind of style,” Floris says. “It’s like you were...um...”

“Trying too hard to be someone you’re not.” To distinguish himself from his brother, perhaps?

“Oh...I thought so,” Tubbo says, sighing dejectedly.

“Maybe you should let your heart decide.” Clay pauses. “Okay, that sounded way cheesier than I thought it would.”

This elicits a laugh from Tubbo.

“What I mean is that you shouldn’t think too hard about being different. You should choose what *you* want to wear, not for...not for any other reason.”

Tubbo hums, turning back to the racks and shelves of shirts, pants, jeans...

“How about this?” Tubbo picks out a sepia-coloured button-down with a matching diamond-patterned vest. Floris suggests a pair of brown pants that would go with it.

[Tubbo’s](#) new look is certainly something that Clay wouldn’t deem an eyesore. In fact, it’s far from that. If anything, the outfit put together screams “Tubbo”. Clay knows that Tubbo can feel it too, from the way he looks down at himself, using the mirror in the changing room to view his outfit from various angles.

“What do you think?” Tubbo asks.

“Well, I think it looks nice, but the decision is ultimately yours, Tubbo,” Clay says.

“You should get it,” Floris insists. “Trust me. You look awesome.”

Tubbo practically glows with the compliments and he heads on over to the cashier to purchase it. He walks up to Clay with the bag and beams.

“Thanks for that. Seriously,” Tubbo says as they make their way to the platforms. “I’ll be honest; it’s not easy trying to tear myself away from being Thomas to actually being Tubbo. It’s like, I’m stuck somewhere in between.”

“I think it just takes some consistent effort, reminding yourself not to be burdened to not be him...” Clay taps his card against the reader. “It’ll take some time. Maybe days or even weeks, but you’ll get there in the end.”

Tubbo smiles, gaze dropping to the ground. “Thank you. Really. I mean it.”

It is Tubbo’s train that arrives first and he leaves with a quick wave. Clay hoists the plastic bag higher up onto his arm as he retrieves his phone from his pocket to answer messages.

Hmm? It looks like Harvey wants to meet tomorrow...

*

[1/18 – MONDAY – EVENING](#)

"God that movie sucked," Nick mutters, stifling a yawn. He gives Clay a funny look. "What're you smiling at?"

"Who else?" Floris sighs, curled up beside him on the couch.

George: Good night

Me: :) Good night!!

"Well, that explains it," Nick says, and Clay jolts, locking his phone.

"What the hell? What happened to privacy?"

"Sorry." Nick holds up his hands. "And correct me if I'm wrong, but are you two still together?"

Clay's silence is answer enough. "I don't think he liked me, Nick. Not in that way." He forces a smile. "We're still friends, though, if that's what you're worried about."

"Then why'd he agree to be your boyfriend last time?" Floris asks.

Clay sighs. "Maybe he wanted...he wanted to get close to me. Learn about our plans and...and everything. So he could set me up for my murder."

Nick and Floris go quiet.

"That's all in the past," Clay says, hoping to cut through the mounting tension. "We're on good terms now."

"His feelings for you might not have been real, but yours..."

Clay shakes his head and stands, making for their room. They're beginning infiltration again on Wednesday. He needs all the rest he can get.

*

1/19 – TUESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

"Where is this?"

Clay glances around. Beatty is awfully noisy at this time of the day; many students from neighbouring schools usually gather here after classes to patronize the numerous cafés and bookstores. Where they're standing, however, is devoid of many people. An empty lot in a quiet corner near the suburban areas. The shops here are few but cosy, places that Clay wouldn't mind spending a peaceful afternoon here.

"You know how I said I wanted to start a chain of cafés?" Harvey says. He taps his foot against the cobblestone in front of the lot. "This is the spot I was talking about. The lot where it'll all begin."

"That's cool. When're you gonna start transforming it into, uh, Harvey's little café?"

"I was thinking April or so," Harvey says, scratching his head, "after I graduate." He sighs. "Look, I...I'm sorry."

"Sorry? For almost accepting Dr Montgomery's reality?"

Harvey's eyes widen. "Yeah. Took the words right out of my mouth."

Clay chuckles. "There's no need to be sorry. Really. I totally understand why you'd choose that. Your father's alive, after all. Alive and treating you right."

Harvey dips his head. "Yeah, that's true. But you know, I don't want to throw away all that...all those experiences too. It's what helped me improve myself and get stronger. Without you guys, I'd probably still be trapped in that stupid marriage."

Clay nods. Harvey turns back to the empty lot. "I just wanna give my thanks too, for snapping me out of that. To make up for it, I'm gonna get even stronger so I can be someone worthy of the team."

Blue light flickers behind Harvey, and Clay looks up to see his Persona's new form, Lucy. Armed with an arsenal of firearms stowed away in her frilly dress, she carries a briefcase carved of gold, studded with sparkling gems. She titters and condenses into a sphere of light, sinking into and

fusing with Harvey's soul.

"Oh my God. This is embarrassing as heck." Harvey laughs, rubbing his nape. His eyes gleam as he meets Clay's once more. "Shall we go? We've got a long day tomorrow."

Clay nods. He's got some new book recommendations from Wilbur and he's seen a few titles that look fairly interesting. He waves goodbye to Harvey as they part at the station.

*

Chapter End Notes

Charm +5 (watching movie)

Kindness +5 (reading book)

Laboratory of Sorrow: Infiltration Middle

Chapter Summary

dr montgomery's past

Chapter Notes

It's so hard writing dream as a good guy when in the SMP he's like THE top villain lmao.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

1/20 – WEDNESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“It’s gone!”

Tubbo runs up to the spot where the vines once blocked their way. Just as they had cleared it out in Mementos, the ones in the Palace has disappeared too. Fundy does a little dance of triumph and Skeppy pumps his fists into the air. With a wave of his hand, Dream leads the team down the hallway, which brings them to a three-way intersection.

“There’s some kind of barrier over there,” Navi says, gesturing towards what appears to be holographic lock spinning ever so slowly in mid-air. Beside the hologram is a panel with one simple question displayed across its screen.

What caused Tammy Montgomery to begin researching cognitive psience? Four options are given below: Her friend, Her family, Her mentor and Her lover. Dream seems to remember Dr Montgomery telling him something like this before, something terrible that had motivated her to start her research. However, no matter how hard he thinks about it, he draws an embarrassing blank.

“Maybe there are clues lying around,” Fundy says. “Let’s go look for them.”

The only other way forward is the third hallway, one that leads to a small, musty room filled with dusty files and books of all sizes and colours. It’s dark, and the single unlit lightbulb dangling from fraying wires above them does not help. What really captures their attention, however, is the television at the far end of the room, buzzing with static.

Techno inspects what appears to be a CD player. “There’s a disc inside.”

“Can we watch it?” Eret asks. “It might have the clues we need.”

It’s not like there’s anything else they can try. Techno presses a button on the player and like magic, the static begins to clear, screen depicting a hospital ward. A woman whom Dream has never seen before lays on the bed, staring unblinkingly at the camera. On the contrary, the other person in the room, a woman that Dream is all too familiar with, is seated hunched over by her

bedside.

[“Patricia.”](#) Dr Montgomery mumbles. She looks younger, but her face more weathered, more wrinkled. “How are you feeling?”

The woman’s, Patricia’s, eyes are empty, like she didn’t even register the fact that she’s being spoken to. Dr Montgomery sighs, hanging her head, both hands grasping Patricia’s.

It all comes back to Dream now. Dr Montgomery’s story, that is.

“If only I hadn’t invited you over...” The regret in Dr Montgomery’s voice is evident. “If only I could have...Then you wouldn’t have had to face this and...” She trails off, body shaking in an effort to hold back her tears.

It is then that it happens. Neither women at the scene may have noticed the wave of blue and white that envelopes the room, shrouding them in glitter and sparkles. What was that?

“Um...hello?”

Patricia’s lips are moving, her voice soft and gentle. Dream’s brows furrow as he watches Dr Montgomery rip herself away, her hands still on Patricia’s. Patricia regards her with puzzlement, her head tilted.

“Patricia? Are you alright? Why did you...?” Dr Montgomery splutters, at a complete loss for words.

“I...I’m fine,” Patricia says unsurely. “Just peachy. That’s all.” The quizzical look has not disappeared from her face. “Um...no offense or anything, because you seem so concerned but...do I...know you?”

Dream’s heart drops, as if he’s physically there, in Dr Montgomery’s shoes. It is hard to watch Dr Montgomery’s half-hearted attempts at trying to keep it together. Her expression crumbles and her shoulders sag...In that one instant, she is the very picture of defeat.

“I...” Dr Montgomery shakes her head. “I think I’ve got the wrong person. I’m sorry.”

She stands and bids Patricia a final goodbye. The door clicks shut behind her, and that is when the video ends, the screen fizzling into static again.

[“I...don’t](#) get it,” Skeppy says, folding his arms.

“Dr Montgomery told me this before. She told me about how her best friend’s parents were killed by burglars right in front of her,” Dream says, “and she never really had recovered from the mental trauma.”

“That’s awful...” Bad mumbles, eyes still on the static screen.

“And this must have been the first time that Dr Montgomery activated her power,” Techno says.

“To alter reality?” Eret looks deep in thought, fingers on his chin.

Fundy nods. “It’s impressive, though. Her will is strong enough to manifest her Persona’s powers, even though she’s not in the Metaverse.”

“I wonder how long ago that is,” Tubbo wonders. “Probably a few years back, I think.”

"Maybe," Sapnap says. "She came to our school at the start of the year, and she's already studied cognitive science for a while."

Navi jabs a thumb at the door. "Should we get going? I think we've got our answer to that question."

Dream nods, and they exit the room, headed straight for the holographic barrier. Dream deactivates the device, allowing them passage down this new hallway. An elevator waits at the end, and the team files into it. With the push of a button, the car ascends even higher, bringing them deeper into the Laboratory.

*

The elevator grinds to a halt, its doors opening to a spacious, featureless hall. The white of the walls and overhanging lights is blinding, forcing Dream to squint as he glances around.

"I'm still not sensing the Treasure," Navi says, drawing up his holographic map. "I think we're about...forty per cent through the Palace."

"Forty per cent?" Skeppy cries.

"We're *already* forty per cent," Bad says, knocking his knuckles against Skeppy's head. "Stop whining."

Tubbo's voice pierces through the air. "I don't want to alarm you, but we've got company!"

[Shadows](#) are bubbling up from the floor, black bodies wriggling as they plop from the ceiling, bleeding in from the walls. Dream unsheathes his dagger and summons Mada, injecting his dagger with a fiery blaze.

Tubbo calls upon Cendrillon's power, throwing up a veil of light that sends the Shadows flying against the wall, dissolving into piles of dust. Bad and Skeppy shoot down Shadows from afar, those that have yet to transform. Sapnap and Eret find themselves facing down a horde of Chimeras while Techno, Fundy and TapL team up to take down a bunch of Loa.

Navi is, needless to say, busy, directing the Thieves and giving out commands as quickly as he can. Chimeras weak to Ei skills, Loa weak to Light and Psi. Don't use Zio or Agi or Frei...

"There's too many! We're going to have to make a run for it!" Fundy's voice is muffled by the din of battle.

"Is there a safe room ahead?" Dream shouts.

Necronomicon whirrs, green hieroglyphs floating in the air around it.

"Through that door on your left!" Navi shines a beam of light at said door in the distance, across the expanse of the hall.

"Everyone! Cut through them!" Dream summons Black Frost, forming a wall of ice around them, stopping the Shadows further away from attacking. TapL sends a grenade at the remaining Shadows blocking their way, blasting them to smithereens and clearing the path.

Skeppy takes the lead, sliding along the slippery ice and slams against the door ahead. The door opens up to a room that appears to be a research lab. Lining the walls are shelves stuffed full of books and papers. Stone benches and desks are arranged neatly with sinks and other strange

scientific devices and computers fixed to the walls.

Amongst the grey and white, Dream notices a distortion in space.

“In here!” He crashes into the ice of the steel door, revealing a locker room not dissimilar to the ones they’ve seen before. The chittering of Shadows grates Dream’s ears as he waits for each Thief to enter the room before slamming the door shut.

[“Why](#) the hell do we always have to enter safe rooms this way?” Sapnap complains.

“No fucking clue,” Fundy mutters.

“Language!”

“At least we’re safe,” Tubbo says with a sigh of relief, settling down on one of the hard, plastic chairs.

Dream takes his seat furthest from the entrance. The cacophony of Shadows outside is really getting on his nerves. Fundy joins him, wrapping him in a blanket of green light and healing all his wounds. The rest of the Thieves are either gathered around the table, playing a game of poker with the deck of cards that Sapnap somehow managed to stash into his pocket, or just sitting around chatting.

They’ll wait for the Shadows to disperse, then they’ll continue on with their infiltration.

*

[“Coast](#) clear,” Fundy says, poking his head back into the safe room. “Let’s go.”

Dream takes the lead, ears perked up, sensitive to the Shadows’ mutterings. This research lab looks all the same no matter which room Dream enters. White, apparatus-laden, *sterile*. There are still a couple of Shadows patrolling the hallways, but they’re weak enough that the team can take out with several bullets.

When Dream arrives at the top of the second flight of stairs, he comes face to face with a blue barrier stretched across the hallway, once more depicting a spinning lock. Well, at least they know where they’re supposed to go now.

“It’s another one of those things.” Navi sighs.

Dream approaches the device and inspects the question: *What was missing that caused Tammy Montgomery’s research to be halted?* The options: Success rate, Viability, Plausibility and Evidence.

“There might be a clue around here,” Eret says. “Let’s keep our eyes peeled.”

The clue doesn’t take long to find. Wandering around the labs, Dream chances upon a room with oak doors that look identical to the one that they had seen when they began infiltration today.

Unfortunately, the doors are locked. No matter how Dream jiggles the knob, no matter how hard Sapnap or Skeppy rams their shoulder into the doors, they do not budge.

“Maybe there’s another way in,” Navi says, consulting his map. The group is silent as Navi assesses their options.

“Is there, like, a vent or something?” Eret asks.

“Well, it’s not that simple,” Navi says. “There is a vent on the next floor that leads to the outside.” The outside being that space where they had fought the Shadows earlier, visible through a large window from where they’re standing. There are iron beams spanning the length of the hall. “Then I’m thinking we can use our grappling hooks to lower ourselves to the second floor and break a window to get into the room.”

“Then what do we do if we want to get out?” Tubbo asks. “Do we have to go back down to where all the Shadows are?”

“I can unlock the doors from the inside.”

“Well, if there’s no other way in…” Dream says, approaching the stairwell that will bring them to the next floor.

“Oh damn.”

Dream presses his back flush against the wall. There are *many* Shadows on this floor, most of them burning with red auras. They really have this place under tight security.

“There’s the vent,” Navi whispers, stabbing his finger at a grate at the far end of the hall, past several strong Shadows conducting chemical experiments in the labs, striding to and fro with those coats whipping by their slender legs. They seem to be moving in a set pattern, entering labs for certain periods of time before emerging from them again. There are intervals where there are no Shadows in the hallways.

Well, Dream has an idea on how to keep them in there for good. He glances back at his team. “Skeppy. Bad. You’re up.”

Bad holds out two hands, Celestine glowing behind him. The flame starts out small, hot enough to melt the metal of the doors of the labs. As soon as that happens, Skeppy encases the goopy metal in ice, gluing the doors to their doorjambs and trapping the Shadows within.

“Okay. I think all the Shadows should be in the labs, but still, be careful,” Navi says. “It’s not long before they realize what’s up.”

Dream dashes over to the vent, digging his blade into the sliver of space between the grate and the wall. The grate comes loose, clattering to the ground. Well, the vent’s bigger than he expected. Still a tight squeeze, but manageable. Dream goes first, wriggling through the vent and emerging on the other end, where nothing but an unsteady iron beam awaits. He activates his grappling hook, the wire curling around the beam. Dream tugs on it once, twice, before dropping from the vent.

His stomach plummets as he falls through the air, jerking to a halt when the wire pulls taut. Dream dangles from the wire, swaying like a pendulum, above Shadows patrolling the hall below. He swallows a lump in his throat as he turns to face the window which he is supposed to break.

A Shadow stares back at him.

Well, shit.

Dream summons Zaou-Gongen, drawing his arm back and hurling his dagger into the glass. The glass shatters just as the Shadow transforms into a Macabre. He summons Sraosha, spearing the Macabre with a pillar of light, but not before taking a hit to the chest from the Macabre’s arrow of darkness. It forces the air from his lungs, leaving Dream hacking and coughing. His heart burns, the simmering heat spreading throughout his body, as if someone has just punctured a hole in his torso and left him out to bleed.

Dream summons Mada, shooting a stream of fire into the air and propelling himself towards the broken window, extending the cord of the wire as he sees fit. When his soles scrape the floor, he calls out to his team.

One by one, they make their way down, making use of grappling hooks and Ender Pearls to lower themselves into the room. This room is, as expected, almost a duplicate of the other one. Left untouched for some time, judging from the layer of dust on the books and desks.

Their point of interest, however, is the television buzzing with static in a corner of the room. Techno operates the CD player and disc inside begins to play.

[Dr](#) Montgomery is sitting with her friend, the one that Dream had met back at the buffet, at a bar. What was his name again? Hans?

Lights flash against the walls, the telltale glimmer of a disco ball peeking through the throngs of dancing bodies. The background noise is drowned out, and Dr Montgomery's and her friend's voices are clear as day.

"They want to shut the research down?" Hans asks, wine glass in hand.

"Yeah." Dr Montgomery nods, visible spots of red on her cheeks. "They keep telling me that there's no evidence that it would work, but how am I supposed to get evidence if I'm not allowed to do research?"

Hans stays silent, staring at his wine. Dr Montgomery lowers her head onto the counter, fingers tight around her cup of beer.

"Are you sure it's the lack of evidence that made them shut it down?" Hans asks.

"I don't know, but after pouring so much time and money into it...and they're going to stop it just like that..." Dr Montgomery sighs, her cheek flat against the surface. "Don't they realize just how many lives they can save? How many people's pain they can rid?"

"I think that someone's trying to stop you from behind the scenes," Hans says. "Must be someone powerful if your boss is bending to his will."

"Even if it's some kind of government conspiracy, I've got no proof of anything." Dr Montgomery sighs. "The sponsors have backed out. I don't think the college is going to let me continue using their labs anymore..."

"I'm so done with that stupid college." Hans sips at his wine, the hate in his voice evident.

"I'm not going to give up, though," Dr Montgomery says resolutely. "I'm going to prove the existence of the cognitive world and after that, I can only imagine how many people I can help."

Hans hums, looking unconvinced. The screen fades back into static, leaving the Thieves in contemplative silence.

[I think,](#) Techno says, with less certainty than he should, "that my father did this."

Navi nods. "*Our* father. Sounds like something he'd do. Probably stole the research right out of her hands."

Singh. Still tormenting them even weeks after they've made him confess. What a cockroach.

“Well, we know what stopped her research now,” Eret says. “Let’s head back to the barrier, shall we?”

Navi proceeds to unlock the door, pushing it open to reveal an empty hallway. He leads them back to the holographic barrier and the device, which Dream punches in the correct answer.

The barrier deactivates and the Phantom Thieves are granted access to an elevator, and the only way to go is up.

*

The elevator doors slide open and the Thieves are deposited at a floor sparkling with glitter. The golden wallpapers are hard on the eye, as is the elaborate chandelier hanging over their heads. There are quite a few cognitive beings milling about, chatting with each other, loitering quietly in a corner...but there’s one characteristic they share that really creeps Dream out. All of them are smiling, be it a gentle quirk of the lips or a wide, teathy grin.

A group of boys nearby erupt into rambunctious laughter, startling Fundy, who scampers up Dream’s arm, coiled around his shoulder.

“There’s a Shadow,” Techno says, gesturing towards what appears to be a reception counter. The Shadow is staring at them with those ominous crimson eyes of its, as if beckoning them over.

“It doesn’t look like it’s going to attack us,” Eret says.

“Let’s see what it has to say.” Dream approaches the counter and the Shadow bows.

“Good morning sirs,” the Shadow says. He makes a sweeping motion at the door to the next room. “That door will lead you to an examination room, where you must make a choice.”

“Make a choice?”

“Indeed. We wish to tailor our program to suit your needs,” the Shadow says. Its eyes curve into crescents. “Before we do so, it is imperative that you answer a few questions in order to help us determine your current mentality.”

“Current mentality...?” TapL mumbles.

“The instructions will be displayed on the control panel in that room,” the Shadow says. “Please, do go on ahead.”

No battle, no nothing. Just answering a few questions. Easy. Dream nods and thanks the Shadow for its help.

“It’s not a trap, is it?” Sapnap asks.

“I don’t think so,” Navi says. “No Shadows in the next room. Let’s go see what this test entails.”

“Oh, um...” Tubbo holds up a hand, stopping the rest of the Thieves in their tracks. “I actually...I actually have a meeting with my coach soon. Is it possible to head back at the next safe room?”

Dream glances at his phone. Oh. It’s about an hour to their curfew as well. Dammit. It looks like they’ve got to come back another time.

“There’s one over there,” Navi says, pointing at a distorted door, conspicuous against the wall. “There should be an emergency route there that leads us back to the entrance.”

[Once](#) the last Thief is through the door, Dream turns to address the team. “Good job, everyone. I think we’re going to have to go back today. Sapnap, Fundy and I have a curfew so...we really need to be getting back too.”

“Then I guess we can wrap it up today,” Eret says. “We’ll come back here on...”

“Is Saturday fine for everyone?” Bad asks.

Dream nods. Sunday would probably be ideal, but Sapnap *does* have work...

“Alright then,” Dream says, a hand on the knob of the emergency exit. “Let’s get some rest and we’ll meet back here on Saturday.”

There are no objections, and the Thieves follow Dream’s lead, taking the long corridor and dizzying spiral staircase that brings them down to the very first floor, right outside the main entrance of the Laboratory.

Dream activates the Meta-Nav, the familiar automated voice entering his ears.

“Returning to the real world. Thank you for your hard work.”

*

[1/20 - WEDNESDAY - EVENING](#)

George: Good night

Me: Nights \o/

Chapter End Notes

HOLY SHIT SADIST ANIMATION IS LIKE IM SCREECHING AND SPEECHLESS

Dream SMP spoilers:

"You betrayed me!"

"The discs were worth more than you ever were."

"I _am_ worthy."

"You were the worst leader that L'manburg ever had."

Oh my God the FEELS in this stream was A++. welp the war is tomorrow (i think) and TOMMY IS BACK IN LMANBURG altho im kinda worried about what punz is gonna do too since he's, well, pretending to be on their side...and is quackity gonna be like de facto leader since he and tubbo was like "whatever happens you'll be in charge"...?

Thankful to You

Chapter Summary

the last 2nd pair of 3rd tier personas! + some tubbo stuff

Chapter Notes

i swear my end notes this time is probably as long as the chap itself

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

1/21 – THURSDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“Clay!”

Clay turns around at the sound of his name, noticing Tubbo bounding down the staircase, taking two steps at a time.

“Hey, Tubbo. You heading home?”

Tubbo gives an affirmative response and falls into step beside him, the two of them heading out the school gates, stepping onto the pavement bathed in snow.

“I’ve got something to tell you, Clay,” Tubbo says with the brightest expression. “There’s another coding competition coming up. It’s...uh...taking place around the end of the month.”

“Really? That’s great.”

“I don’t think it will interfere with Phantom Thief duties, but it’s going to be spread across two days,” Tubbo says. “On the twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth, I should think.”

“We’ll keep those dates free, then,” Clay says. “Do you need some time to prepare too?”

“No. That’s fine.” Tubbo kicks a pebble, eyes following the rock as it slides through the snow and onto the asphalt. “I’ve decided. I’m gonna do Thomas proud in this competition. It’s my second time going in without him and my first time going in without him as Tubbo, but I’m not afraid. Not anymore.”

Clay nods. Tubbo’s got this. No matter what happens in this competition, no matter the verdict, the place that he’s got, Tubbo is a winner. A winner for facing his past mistakes and standing back up after his setbacks, doing his best to correct his wrongdoings. In Clay’s eyes, that is the mark of a champion.

“Well then, I wish you luck, Tubbo.”

Tubbo grins. He breaks into a sprint as soon as the bus stop, and a bus, is in sight. Clay returns Tubbo’s enthusiastic wave, watching till the latter disappears into the bus.

“He’s really grown,” Floris says, pawing at Clay’s shoulder.

“Right.”

“Oh yeah. Nick asked you to buy groceries. I’m reminding you now. Don’t forget it.”

Clay sighs.

*

1/21 – THURSDAY – EVENING

George: Good night

Me: Good night XD

“Hey, can I talk to you about something?”

Clay looks up from his phone, trying to wipe that dopey grin from his face. Nick doesn’t seem to care, though. He bites his lip, arms crossed over his chest.

“What is it?”

“Can we talk, like, outside?” Nick says, glancing at the door.

Clay pushes himself off the bed, leaving a snoring Floris behind and heads out with Nick into the cold.

They walk and walk with no destination in sight, but the neighbourhood is familiar, a place that Clay has been living in for close to a year now. He’d be sad to see this place go.

Nick suddenly stops, and Clay almost bumps into him. He settles down at a bench, the same bench beside the vending machines that they always rested at after jogging together.

“Sorry for calling you out into the cold like this,” Nick says, wrapping his arms around himself.

“Well, you’d better be. I’m freezing my ass off.”

Nick laughs. “I just thought that the cold will make us more awake.”

It’s certainly working. Clay sits down beside Nick, flinching at the chill of the *metal* bench seeping through his jeans.

“So, um, just wanted to talk to you about the...the whole alternative reality thing,” Nick says.

“Must have been a shock for you when Neil suddenly came back to life.”

“Yeah. I wasn’t expecting that at all,” Clay says. “You guys are really similar, you know. Almost mistook him for you.”

Nick chuckles, breaths visible in the frigid air. “A part of me wanted to stay in that reality, a reality where me, my mom, everyone else...we were happy.”

“Then why didn’t you?”

“Because I felt like it would be betraying you if I did,” Nick says. “You were working so hard behind the scenes to fight against this...this control. If I let myself fall to this, then I would

seriously suck as a friend.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” Clay says adamantly. “I mean, I understand why you’d want to...since Neil...”

“The fact remains is that Neil isn’t here anymore,” Nick says. “No amount of wishing can bring him back. That Neil? The one born from my memory? He was only the idea of Neil. He wasn’t him. He was just an...an empty husk.”

Clay drops his gaze.

“So I’m going to...I’m going to fight. I want to save other people from this same fate,” Nick says, standing. Clay follows suit. “And that’s why I’m gonna keep fighting alongside you. I’m gonna work even harder to live up to your expectations.”

Clay smirks. “I have very high expectations, you know.”

Nick punches Clay on the arm. “Then I’ll just have to work harder.”

As with the Thieves before him, Clay can see the faint shape of William behind Nick, born from the fusion of both Captain Kidd and Seiten Taisei. William takes his pirate’s hat off and salutes Clay. Clay nods in acknowledgement, and William descends into Nick’s soul as a ball of white, fusing with his very core.

“Okay,” Nick says, slinging an arm around Clay’s neck. “Let’s head home. It’s freaking cold.”

Clay shivers. He’d have to agree with Nick on that wholeheartedly.

*

1/22 – FRIDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“I thought you’d be here.”

Clay watches as Blade pushes himself off the wall, slipping his phone into his pocket. Why Blade would be waiting outside his school, with not even a call or text to forewarn him should boggle Clay’s mind, but he already knows the reason.

“What’s up?” Clay asks.

“We need a nice, long chat,” Blade says. “Let’s go to the park.”

*

The park is noisy on a Friday. There are many children playing around, hurling snowballs at each other, building snowmen and making snow angels. Clay and Blade stroll past the merry crowd in silence.

“What’s wrong?” Clay asks. “You don’t usually ask to see me.”

If Blade ever looked embarrassed, this is the closest that Clay’s ever seen him, with a bashful smile and a hand on his nape.

“Well, I just want to say that I had nearly committed a grave mistake,” Blade says. “And it could have gotten worse. Don’t get me wrong.”

“You could have stayed in that reality forever.”

Blade purses his lips. “Essentially, yes.”

“You want to say sorry about getting sucked into that alternate reality.”

“Yes.”

“And you’re here to thank me for getting rid of that fantasy.”

“Yes.”

“I’ve basically apologized for you to myself.”

“Yes.”

Clay sighs. Blade laughs, the sound loud and free, drowned out by the dense copse of trees.

[“That](#), and one more thing,” Blade says. “I am a man who repays favours, alright. I’m not dishonourable. Violence is the only universal language, Clay, and for the team, I’m going to shout it from the rooftops.”

“That’s what I like to hear.” Clay grins.

A blue shadow flares from behind Blade, a roaring motorcycle armed with mechanical wings and rocket boosters carved out of gold. Fire blazes from the boosters as Agnes peers down at him. Clay smiles, and Agnes fades away into a ball of light, fusing with Blade’s soul.

“It’s almost dinnertime,” Blade says. “Want to go grab something from Valentine’s?”

Clay shakes his head. “Sorry. I promised George that I’m eating with him. Maybe next time.”

He and Blade part ways at the train station. Clay’s train arrives first. He waves to Blade and gets on it, finding an empty seat – terribly difficult at this time of day on a Friday – and sticks his Air Pods into his ears. In less than half an hour, he’d be meeting George again.

Chapter End Notes

Faith arcana rank 8 -> 9 (tubbo)

Dream SMP spoilers:

From ranboo's stream yesterday:

THE DREAM IN RANBOO'S HEAD: "YOU MUST HAVE JUST NOT REMEMBERED" holy shit

omg ranboo's rp skills is like friggin awesome man

ahem on to today's stream(s):

WTF SO MANY WITHERS i mean we did see technoblades vault but still. l'manburg

is just...done for at this point. Singing the anthem one last time...omg
(tommyinnit): MARSSSSSS!! love how he, techno and tubbo just stood in the middle of the raining TNT to have their speech. "Our story is not over, Tommy." the lightning istg "Why is my mom so very canon?"

(quackity): "it just doesn't make sense to continue here." OMG I WAS SO AFRAID HE WAS GONNA LEAVE but then again i wld look forward to how this was gonna develop. he managed to rally niki!! "trust nobody." he wanna team with ranboo and jack and BEAT DREAM THROUGH DIPLOMACY seriously wanna see where this goes i'm all down for mind games haha

(wilbur): OMG FRIEND IS GONE! also GHOSTBUR COMING BACK TO LIFE???
"hello i'm ghostbur! goodbye im ghostbur!" WILBUR'S CHANGING THE SONG FOR ERET!! "if phil is the one who brought you out of the world, then he might be the only one who can bring you back." 10th Jan LEGGO

(ranboo): "you can't choose sides if there's no people to choose." I swear this guy's acting is A++ NIKI BURNED THE L'MANTREE???
haven't watched the others (techno, fundy, 2nd half of ranboo, etc) but i might get around to it soon?

Laboratory of Sorrow: Infiltration Core

Chapter Summary

Examination of your choices + 3rd video

Chapter Notes

i loved this part in the game it was really cool

this took really long im sorry i started writing it on the 6th but well im beginning to work on another fic after a flash of inspiration so there's...that...

1/23 – SATURDAY – DAYTIME

“There are so many words...” Skeppy mutters.

Dream and Navi are hunched over the panel, with Blade and Bad peering over their shoulders. According to the Shadow from a couple of days ago, they’re supposed to be undergoing some sort of mental health examination, or something. The instructions are on the control panel, but Dream has never done too well with such large chunks of text.

A scenario is laid out before them, with two options they’d have to pick between in response to it. The scenario goes as follows: You and a friend are attacked by muggers on the way home. The group of muggers seize your friend and his life is now in danger.

“What are the options?” Sapnap asks.

Option A) You can choose to attempt to save your friend, to which you could risk bodily harm to yourself. Option B) However, you can also choose to abandon your friend for now and get help from the police.

“Wait, so we’re supposed to pick what we’d do?” Tubbo asks.

“Yeah,” Navi says as he steps away from the panel and pulls up his map. Dream looks up. In front of them are two elevators, one representing option A, and the other representing option B. Get on the elevator corresponding to your choice and pull the lever. Easy.

“I would go with A,” Sapnap says. “I mean, you can’t just leave your friend, right?”

“We shouldn’t pick rashly,” Techno says. “There might be a catch we don’t know about.”

“The elevators bring us to different hallways,” Navi says, dismissing his map. “I think our best course of action now, if we want to get to the end fast is to pick the option that Dr Montgomery would want people to pick.”

“We don’t want to be getting bogged down by all these random procedures,” Eret agrees.

“There’s a lounge,” Fundy says, gesturing to a small candlelit room fitted with plush couches and surreal paintings on the walls. “We can discuss our answers there.”

“Okay then,” Dream claps his hands. “Let’s think on it for a second.”

The Thieves settle themselves on the couches, with TapL grabbing a cushion and hugging it to his chest. Dream leans over the coffee table, fingers clasped in front of him.

“Let’s go over the options,” Dream says. “Option A: Try to save your friend from the muggers at risk of harm to yourself. Option B: Run to get help from the police.”

“I don’t think A is the answer,” TapL says immediately.

“Why not?”

“Because Dr Montgomery has been all about letting everyone be happy, right? Like, she cares way more about individual happiness,” TapL says.

“So she wants people to care for themselves first?” Eret asks.

“Something like that.”

“But if you don’t save your friend, then you might regret it if the police comes too late and your friend dies,” Skeppy says. “Aren’t you just hurting yourself later?”

“They’re muggers, though,” Tubbo says. “If we get ourselves killed trying to help our friend, then we’d probably wouldn’t be very happy. I’d go with option B.”

“Dr Montgomery is more likely to prioritize the happiness of the heart, I think,” Fundy says.

Techno nods. “Physical wounds can heal, but regret lasts forever.”

The Thieves are plunged into silence as they contemplate their own answer. A...or B?

A hand on Dream’s wrist jolts him. He looks up into Navi’s goggles. “Have you figured it out?”

Dream stands. “Kinda.”

Navi nods. “As long as you know what you’re doing.”

Dream gulps as he approaches the elevator corresponding to the answer B. He pulls the lever and the elevator takes the Thieves up to the next floor, where they are greeted by a Shadow in a lab coat.

Did he get it wrong?

“No abnormalities detected,” the Shadow says with a creepy smile growing on its face. “Please proceed to the next question.”

The next question? There’s more? Figures, since this is a test and all.

Dream pushes the door open at the far end of the room and heads on over to the next hall.

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The next hall is just a tad bigger, housing three elevators instead of two. There are several

cognitive beings here as well, speaking to each other in low tones. Dream pays them no mind and heads on over to the panel waiting for them in the middle of the chamber.

The scenario goes as follows: You have been trying very hard to make your personal dream come true. However, it's just not coming to fruition. It's causing you a lot of grief, but if you give up now, your hard work would have amounted to nothing. What should you do?

And thus, the options:

- A) Continue trying! If you put in the consistent effort, you are sure to make it work eventually!
- B) Do whatever it takes to make it come true, even if you have to resort to underhanded methods.
- C) Give up this dream for a new one.

"I think we can safely say that option B is out," Fundy says.

"Why not?" Techno asks. "The end justifies the means, probably. If you're happy at the end, does the Doctor really care how you became happy?"

"He's got a point," Sapnap says, nodding.

Dream glances around, noticing a group of cognitive beings waiting for their turn to read the panel. "Let's not stand here and block everyone. Is there anywhere we can discuss our answers?"

"There's another lounge over there," Navi says, leading the team over to a room identical to the first lounge, and the team gathers around the coffee table once more.

"I don't think option B is right," Skeppy says.

"I don't think so either," Bad says. "Even if you achieve your dream, you'll live with the guilt of whatever you did to achieve it."

"What about option A? Try until you get it?" Fundy asks. "You aren't giving up on your dream. You're just taking a while longer to get it."

"But the thing is, you might not even get it," Tubbo says. "You're probably putting in the effort without getting something to show for it in the end."

"What about option C, then?" Dream asks. "Changing your dream to one you're more likely to succeed in?"

"I second that," Eret says, leaning back against the couch. "I wouldn't say our hard work was a waste even if our dream isn't achieved. We would still have been able to learn something from trying to, um, achieve that dream."

"What if you're really passionate about your old dream, though? What if there had been some sentimental attachment to it?" TapL asks. "Like, if I had to give up rebuilding Lee Foods, I don't think I can...look my father in the eyes even in..." He trails off but stands adamant on his stance.

With three options this time, the Thieves are even more conflicted than before. Navi turns to Dream.

"The final decision lies in your hands," Navi says. "You're our leader."

Dream nods. TapL and Fundy seem to want to try option A, but Sapnap and Techno are willing to

go with option B. Eret, Bad, Skeppy and Tubbo are hinging on option C. Navi hasn't said anything so far.

After a few minutes of awkward silence, Dream rises. He's got the answer...*his* answer, at least.

"Let's go."

*

"If we consider what Dr Montgomery views as true happiness, I think this option is the closest to that idea," Dream says, tugging on the lever of Elevator C.

"I think so too," Eret says. "The keyword here is 'true happiness'. She wouldn't want someone to be happy by building their happiness on other people's sorrow."

"And she wouldn't want someone to continue doing something when their diligence doesn't give them what they want in the short term," Bad says.

"So the most likely option was option C," Navi says.

The elevator grinds to a halt and the Thieves are once again greeted by a Shadow in his standard white coat, clipboard in hand. The Shadow bows.

"No abnormalities detected. Please proceed to the next room for the final question."

Well, they've dodged another bullet there. While Techno, Sapnap, Fundy and TapL may not have been wrong about their idea of happiness, what really matters is how *Dr Montgomery* perceives it.

Dream pushes open the next door to reveal another yet bigger hall, this one housing five elevators. The same type of control panel stands in its centre, displaying the final question.

Imagine that you have powers like the Phantom Thieves of Hearts, where you have the ability to steal a person's heart to make them change their ways. What would you do with that power?

Option A) Use it to gain wealth beyond imagination.

Option B) Don't use it. I'm already satisfied with what I have.

Option C) Use it to get the person I like to fall in love with me.

Option D) Use it to steal the hearts of corrupted people.

Option E) Use it to get back at people I want revenge on.

"Is this question targeted at us?" Skeppy mutters. Dream shrugs. Possibly.

"Are we in agreement that options A and E are out?" Bad says. "Singh obviously falls under the first option and we're not like him."

Navi drops his gaze.

"Judging from the answer to the previous question, E is definitely out," Techno says.

"So we're left with B, C and D." Dream folds his arms.

"I don't think that C is correct," Fundy says, "because if we think about the previous question, you

forcing someone to fall in love with you is the same as depriving them of their...um...potential happiness or something, right?"

Dream nods. "Then we're down to options B and D."

"I think it's D," Sapnap says. "If we steal the hearts of corrupted people, won't we feel more fulfilled? And we can spread happiness to other people too. That's what we've been doing all along."

"I'll be honest; I think it's B," Tubbo says. "Even if we have the power, if we ourselves are already happy with what we have, why do we still want to pursue more fulfilment in our lives at the risk of danger?"

"Actually, both options are equally likely," Eret says. "It depends very strongly on what Dr Montgomery herself believes."

"What do you think, Dream?" Fundy asks. "B or D?"

Dream purses his lips. This is hard one, because both sides have presented reasonable arguments when taking into account the correct and wrong answers from the previous questions. Personally, he's inclined towards D in the sense that, given the power, he'd try to help as many people as he can, if he can.

Then again, this isn't what *they* think is true happiness. It's what *Dr Montgomery* thinks is true happiness.

"Why not we split up?" Navi asks. "B and D...each group would have a fifty-fifty chance at getting it right."

"It's dangerous, though," TapL says. "We should stick together in case we actually do need to fight if we pick the wrong answers."

"Better than putting our eggs in one basket," Techno says.

"If we're splitting up, we'll need a way to find each other," Dream says, turning to his team. "Who thinks that the answer is B?"

Tubbo, Fundy and Bad. Everyone else is in the second camp.

"I'll go with this team," Dream says, stepping over to their group. If they encounter any threatening Shadows like Fafnir again, three people wouldn't stand a chance.

"I'll come with." Navi follows him. Both teams head towards their respective elevators and pull the levers. The elevators begin to move, clanking as they make their way up to the next level.

When the elevator stops, Dream finds himself eye to eye with a Shadow, dressed the same way and carrying the same clipboard.

"It appears that you have yet to attain the mentality that would bring you true happiness," the Shadow says, shaking its head regretfully. "Appropriate actions must be taken. Please step this way. Do not resist."

A fight is inevitable. Dream steels himself. He can only hope that the other group is safe, wherever they are. He draws his dagger.

[The](#) Shadow frowns, mouth stretched all the way to its jaw. An unpleasant sight. Dream watches as black goo spills from its flesh, forming Hastur and a flock of Byakhee.

They've taken these down before, and since the last of such battles, they've gotten even stronger. What Dream is really afraid about, however, is that they're fighting in a narrow space cluttered with wall décor and furniture. It'll be hard to coordinate tactics and dodge attacks.

Navi is already contacting the other team, who appears to be nearer than they expected. Naturally, they've gotten the right answer, and are heading here now. Until their arrival, Dream and the others have got to hold them off.

Dream ducks when Hastur initiates the fight with a cannon of white, the beam smashing into the wall. Chips of wall paint swirl around Dream as he summons Black Frost, stomping the ground and erecting a wall of ice to repel a Byakhee's ball of darkness. The other Thieves are equally busy, jumping and rolling to dodge stray fireballs and shots of white.

"Look out!" Navi shouts, Necronomicon's tentacles stabbing into the concrete flooring and reappearing between Dream and a bullet of white. The Megidolaon sphere crashes into the wall of tentacles, searing a hole through it, but fizzling away shortly after.

"Thanks!" Dream shouts. Buying him that one second gives Dream the time he needs to summon Yoshitsune. Drawing an arc with his dagger, Dream sends blades of pure energy through the air, slamming into Hastur and slicing it to bits. Hastur screeches, disappearing into swathes of dust.

The door at the far end bursts open and it takes only a second for several spheres of cyan to rush the Byakhee like homing missiles, striking them down one by one. TapL throws his hand into the air, manifesting a dome of pink that protects them from Eret's subsequent storm of arrows. The last of the Byakhee fall like flies, dissolving into ash and dust.

Dream sheathes his dagger.

"Well, I guess we know what Dr Montgomery thinks now," Skeppy says with a laugh.

"Backup is on the way," Navi says, pulling up his map and seeing several red, blinking dots sliding across the screen. "Let's scram. Now."

The Thieves head out, slamming the door behind them.

"There they are!" Dream snaps his head towards the direction of the sound, eye widening at the horde of Shadows making their way towards them. "Get them!"

"Elevator upstairs! Run!" Navi breaks into a sprint, joined swiftly by the other Thieves.

TapL sends a grenade their way, detonating the staircase and impeding their chase. Bad demolishes the other staircase with a wall of fire.

"Hurry!" Sapnap yells, jamming a finger against the elevator button. As soon as Bad is through the doors, Sapnap stabs the "Door Close" button with utmost urgency. The doors slide shut ever so slowly, concealing the clouds of dust behind it.

A Shadow bursts forth from the cloud, jaws snapping at them. Bad screeches, thrusting a palm out, shooting a fireball at the Shadow. The Shadow is knocked back out of the elevator, whimpering in pain as the doors clunk shut. The tension seeps out of Dream's shoulders, and he slumps against the wall.

[“That](#) was close...” Sapnap is breathless, eyes closed.

The trip is silent, with no Thief daring to speak. The elevator stops once they’re at the next floor, doors opening up to another white, sterile corridor.

“Safe room,” Navi says, gesturing towards a distorted door. Dream leads the team into the locker room, settling himself down at one of the uncomfortable wooden benches.

“That was eventful.” TapL fans himself.

“It was,” Tubbo agrees.

“Navi, how much more of the Palace do we have left?” Dream asks.

“About...I’d say about...” Navi consults his map, swiping through the different screens depicting different areas in the Laboratory. “We’ve got another thirty per cent more to go.”

“That was only seventy per cent? I swear, Palaces aren’t usually this long.” Skeppy sighs, throwing his head against the couch’s backrest.

“We can push on just a bit more if you guys are feeling up to it,” Dream says.

“I’m good,” Bad says.

Eret nods. “Same here.”

“Alright then,” Dream says. “Let’s take a quick rest then we’ll try to make it to the next safe room.”

The room goes quiet, each Thief either absorbed in their own conversation or simply relaxing. The mood is light, despite the wounds and bruises on their skin.

Dream wishes they can stay like this. Just for a little while longer.

*

[“This](#) is...”

The Thieves wander into a waiting room, its cloudy grey walls a sharp contrast to the pristine white that they’ve constantly been seeing. There are many cognitive beings here as well seated on the benches, pamphlets in their hands. Signs and banners line the walls, the words “True Happiness” scrawled all over them.

What really concerns Dream is the giant blue screen at the far end of the room, beside a reception counter. Most of the cognitive beings pass through it, gliding along the corridor towards the room ahead.

“That’s where we need to go,” Navi says, pointing at the screen. “The final area is behind this barrier.”

“Well, what are we waiting for?” Skeppy rushes towards the barrier. “Last one there’s a rotten egg!”

“Wait, don’t-!” Fundy starts, but it’s too late.

Skeppy rushes headfirst into the barrier, repelled by a shock of electricity. He yelps and leaps back.

Bad is by his side instantly, healing him of his burn wounds.

“For some reason, it’s not letting us through,” Navi says. “We’ve got to find another way.” He looks up from his map, glancing around, gaze falling upon yet another blue holographic screen in place of a door, a spinning lock and panel reminding Dream of something familiar...

“It’s another one of those goddamn locks!” Sapnap cries.

Dream reads the question on the panel: How do many adolescents react when they are close to another who is more talented than themselves? The available options are: 'By running away', 'By trying to be more normal', 'By wanting that person to fail' and 'By wishing to be that person'. Dream can't even begin to guess.

“There might be a clue around here just like the last two times.” Fundy says.

Apart from the two barriers, there is a flight of stairs to their right leading up to a door with an ID card scanner affixed to it. Perhaps they might find some clues in the staff area.

“Up there.” Dream runs up the stairs, retrieving the ID card from his coat and tapping it against the scanner.

The door opens with a beep, revealing a suspended circular walkway, a network of iron beams above their heads similar to the ones back in that massive hall. There are several doors, a familiar set of oak ones amongst an array of metal doors.

“Shadows,” TapL says.

“Strong ones.” Techno’s eyes follow them from the doorway.

Probably watching out for intruders. Well, that’s going to be a problem, because *they* are intruders in every sense of the word.

“Let’s head for that room first.” Dream says, crouching along the walls, slinking into the shadows. The rest of the Thieves follow suit, hiding behind carts and crates randomly placed about, watching with bated breath every time a Shadow walks by.

They get to the room with no problem, Dream pushing the door open and Navi shutting it behind them. The room, once again, looks the same, with the same television placed atop a wooden desk, the CD player sitting beside it. Techno presses a button on the player.

Nothing happens. The television continues to display static, the buzzing noise grating at Dream’s ears. Techno frowns, pressing the button again.

Still nothing.

“Is it not working?” Tubbo asks.

Eret walks over and helps Techno get the disc drive out. He shakes his head.

“There’s no CD. We’re going to have to go find it.”

“Find it? But this place is huge!” Fundy exclaims.

“Well, I doubt it’ll be far,” Navi says, sighing. “We can start with this room.”

A search of this room yields nothing looking remotely like a CD. Perhaps it’s in one of the other...

numerous...rooms in his hall. From his initial observation, Dream counted probably...at least five other rooms.

“Let’s split up,” Techno says. “We can cover more ground that way.”

“Pairs,” Dream says. “Let’s go in pairs.”

“But there are strong Shadows out there,” Bad says worriedly.

“As long as we don’t get into any fights, we should be fine,” Sapnap says.

“We can move around less conspicuously in a smaller group too,” Eret says.

As much as Bad, and possibly TapL and Tubbo, are a little apprehensive about the plan, it’s the most efficient one they’ve got. Besides, the hall isn’t that big anyway. Should any of them run into trouble, the other pairs are likely to be right around the corner.

“Right then,” Dream says. He’s teamed with Navi for this one. Fundy with Tubbo, Bad with Skeppy, Eret with Techno and TapL with Sapnap. “Navi will be able to communicate with you all, so we’ll know if you guys find the disc.” He claps his hands. “Let’s move out.”

*

[“The](#) door’s locked.”

Navi frowns, then rattles the padlock. “If it was an electronic lock, I could probably deactivate it. Guess we’ll have to find another way through.”

The clacking of footsteps alerts them to the presence of a Shadow making its rounds. Navi pulls Dream’s wrist, both of them pressing their backs flush against the wall. The Shadow saunters past them, baton in hand, white lab coat flowing behind it. The burn of its aura is hot, sweltering from where Dream is standing mere inches from it.

The Shadow walks past them and continues going, giving them some breathing room.

“We’ve got to find another way in,” Navi whispers, drawing up his map to look for alternative entrances. Dream peers at it. Several red dots blink up at him tauntingly from within a square that represents the room they need to infiltrate.

“Well, shit,” Dream mutters. He counts at least four Shadows. He does not know their strength level, but he can take a guess.

“There must be something in here,” Navi says, swiping between screens depicting the other rooms, each room housing two green dots. “The others haven’t found anything, and there are so many guards it’s not even funny.”

Dream nods. Navi dismisses his map.

“There’s a vent near the room Eret and TapL are that leads to this one.”

“Even if we get in, we can’t possibly fight all the Shadows in there.” Moreover, the room is much too small. Even if Navi’s map isn’t to scale, Dream can estimate roughly the size of the room. If all those Shadows are dangerous ones, then starting an all-out war on them will be a thinly-veiled suicide mission.

“That’s an idiotic move,” Navi says. “We’re just going in, grabbing the disc, and running.”

“But they’ll see-“

“Not,” Navi says, holding a finger to Dream’s lips, a smirk on his face, “if they have something else to look at.”

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[“Come](#) and get me, suckers!”

Fundy screeches with glee as he stirs up a tornado, flitting around like a little orange fairy. Sapnap cackles as he rains thunderbolts from on high, striking as many of the army of Fafnir as possible. Skeppy and Bad unleash a deadly song of ice and fire, the singing of icicle spears through the air complemented by the roaring of flames.

Debris rains from the sky, dust and chunks of concrete splashing about. A grenade detonates in the distance and nuclear bombs drop from the skies above. Arrows of light reinforced with a white veil smashes through the chinks in the Fafnir’s armour, hitting their weak spots and dissolving them into dust.

Dream wishes he’s there to see the damage and havoc his friends are supposedly wracking upon the Shadows right now. Sure, the Palace security level is skyrocketing, and it’d probably get to a point where they should leave or else they’d face severe consequences, but it’s worth it.

Dream is lying flat on his belly in a vent, with Navi right behind him. They are high up in the ceiling, Dream peering through the grate at the four strong Shadows in the room beneath them.

“What the hell’s going on out there?” Three of them dash out of the room, attention drawn to the commotion outside, leaving just one last strong Shadow in the room.

“We’re going to get into a fight as soon as we head down there,” Navi whispers. “Are you ready?”

As long as this guy doesn’t pull another earthquake, they should be fine. Dream curls his fingers around the grate and dislodges it, dropping the grate into the room below.

The clattering of the grate attracts the remaining Shadow, who turns around and hisses.

“What the-? Where did you rats come from?”

Dream lands lightly on the balls of his feet, drawing his dagger shimmering with icicles, frost forming in the air around it. Navi wields his chakrams clouded with spheres of darkness. The Shadow bursts and transforms into Fafnir, its skull for a head as ugly as Dream remembers.

One more thing Dream remembers is that its weakness is the red gem embedded in its belly.

Navi hurls his chakrams, the blades slicing through the air like a hot knife through butter. The chakrams strike the joints of Fafnir’s armour, cutting into whatever little exposed skin it has and drawing blood. The black liquid spills onto the ground, large globules oozing from the wound.

Fafnir roars, countering with a stomp that shakes the room. The ground splits beneath them, splitting and cracking. Dream jumps, Navi right behind him, and he clambers onto the chandelier.

Dream tosses an Ender Pearl, the orb sailing through the air and landing on the ground right behind Fafnir.

“What?” Fafnir’s tail swipes at him, catching Dream off guard as the massive lump of metal rams

into his middle. A sickening crack alerts Dream to countless broken ribs and he goes flying into a bookshelf. Dream coughs. His torso is in agony, the broken bones making it hard to move, or even breathe.

“Dream!” Navi hurls his chakrams once more, diving off the chandelier and whipping out his revolver.

Dream summons Lakshmi, weaving threads of green which heals him up nicely, mending his ribs and giving him some semblance of relief. He rolls away just as Fafnir smashes its tail into where he had been a couple of milliseconds ago.

Navi shoots, one shot, at the red gem, which Fafnir is quick enough to block with its claws. It roars, sending a beam of cyan their way. Dream throws up a blue shield, reflecting the cyan beam back at it. Fafnir merely shrugs it off, laughing as the red gem sparkles mockingly.

“I’m gonna distract it. You get the gem,” Dream says, placing a hand on Navi’s shoulder. He doesn’t give Navi a chance to respond because he’s off, activating his grappling hook, the wire curling around the chandelier. He swings across the chasm which opens up into a swirling black abyss. Once misstep and he’s done for.

Dream switches out to Alice before taking a shot of cyan right in the chest. His body seizes, the cyan hurting more than it should despite the resistance conferred upon him. In retaliation, he hurls balls of darkness at Fafnir, Alice’s unhinged giggling ringing in his ears.

Navi is a blur of black and blue, revolver in hand, leaping from shelf to desk. He fires off a couple of bullets coated with black, each one either missing or unable to shatter the red gem. Dream just needs to buy some more time for Navi to get rid of it once and for all.

Dream switches to Vohu Manah, waving his hand and drawing an arc of light aimed at Fafnir, blinding it. Fafnir roars, dipping its head, presenting Navi an excellent opportunity.

Navi takes it, firing the next bullet which flies straight and true, shattering the red core of the Fafnir and reducing it to a pile of ashes.

[Something](#) drops from its body, and Navi picks it up. Dream retrieves an Ender Pearl from his coat, hurling it towards Navi.

“It’s the disc,” Navi says, blowing on it to clear it of dust. He hands it to Dream. “Let’s get back to the TV.”

The sounds of battle rage outside. It’s time to recall the Thieves and leave a trail of mass destruction behind.

Dream and Navi head out into the ruins of what used to be that circular walkway, now nothing more than dangling beams of iron and crumbling concrete. Dream doesn’t even recognize the place anymore. Any moment now, reinforcements will arrive, and Dream doesn’t want to stick around when that happens.

At Navi’s command, the Thieves drop whatever they’re doing, gathering once more at the entrance to this hall.

“Got the discs?” Fundy asks, descending onto the flight of stairs on his mini tornado.

“Yeah.” Dream holds it up. “Let’s go.”

“Here we go.” Eret slots the disc into the player and starts it. The static on the television begins to clear, revealing a homey room. Two people sit at a table of glass, two people who Dream recognizes instantly.

“You’re Tubbo, huh? I’m Tammy Montgomery, and I will be your counsellor starting today.”

Tubbo hums noncommittally, his eyes on the table. Dr Montgomery gives him a reassuring smile. A moment of silence passes between them.

“Sorry,” Tubbo says, biting his lip. “I’m not quite sure what to say. I’m only here because my parents want me to be.”

“That’s fine,” Dr Montgomery says, nodding. “Do you want to just chat till our time’s up, then?” She leans back against her seat. “Of course, it’s not very possible to for us to discuss something you don’t want to.”

She proceeds to reach into her bag and pull out a box of titbits ranging from granola bars to biscuits and candy, setting it on the table. “I’ve brought a few snacks along too” – That is more than just “a few”, Dream thinks – “so feel free to take whatever you’d like.”

“Thank you.” Tubbo mumbles, reaching for a strawberry cereal bar.

“Let’s start with...” Dr Montgomery touches her chin. “What did you have for lunch today?”

Tubbo munches on the cereal bar, swallowing with much effort.

“I can start first,” Dr Montgomery says, smiling. “A friend of mine gave me a giant crate of apples a few days back and I’ve been trying to finish them since.”

Tubbo takes another bite of his cereal bar.

“I’m getting rather tired of those apples, but then an idea struck me: what if I used them as a meal ingredient?” Dr Montgomery gestures excitedly. “Tried eating it with spaghetti...” She scratches her head. “Didn’t turn out too well.”

This elicits a smile from Tubbo, no matter how small.

“Maybe I just wasn’t doing it right,” Dr Montgomery says with a slight laugh.

“If you grate them, you can make a surprisingly versatile sauce,” Tubbo says. “Then since you’re eating spaghetti, you could put a little more parmesan.”

“You cook, Tubbo?” Her tone is not patronizing at all. Dream can almost feel the warmth from here.

“Yeah. Thomas inspired me to. Said that we should learn to cook healthy meals so we didn’t have to eat out all the time,” Tubbo says. At the mention of his brother, he goes silent again, wrapper crinkling as he crushes it in his fist. “Thomas was an inspiration to me my whole life and now that he’s gone...I’m not sure what to do.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“We made a promise, a pact if you will,” Tubbo says. “We were going to be the best programmers in the world. Make magic with computers and code and stuff. But then...he...he protected me from

a car and..."

Tubbo's shoulders shake. His eyes are shining, tears pooling at their corners. "I can't go on living like this anymore. Without Thomas, I'm nothing. Only he can make our dream come true. Why'd he have to protect me from that car...?" He wraps his arms around himself, gaze on the table, face hidden from view. "I'm sorry. It's just...so overwhelming."

"There's no need to apologize," Dr Montgomery says. "If there's something you need to get off your chest, you may do so."

"Sometimes, I can't help but think that it'd be better if I was Thomas, you know?" Tubbo says, voice wavering. "If only Thomas can make that dream come true, then I want to be him."

"I don't think your train of thought is strange at all," Dr Montgomery says with a shake of her head. "In fact, I think it's perfectly normal to want to become that person."

"Really? But he's so much better than me. I don't think I can ever match up to him."

"We can always start by changing bits of ourselves, little by little," Dr Montgomery says. "Your imagination's the only limit. That's why if you aspire to be more like another person, it's actually possible to achieve that dream."

Tubbo peers up at her questioningly.

"Thought exercises like 'would that person do this?' or 'that person wouldn't do that.' These sorts of thoughts can lead people to change themselves in ways that would more closely mirror their target person."

"So if I imagine myself in Thomas' shoes right now..."

Dr Montgomery nods. "What would he do?"

"He would...He wouldn't cry. That's how strong he is," Tubbo says, fingers clasped in front of him. "He'd continue training, write more code...that sort of thing, probably." He looks up, renewed determination in his eyes. "I want to *be* Thomas, Dr Montgomery."

Dr Montgomery smiles. "I'm sure you can, if you just believe in yourself, Tubbo."

Tubbo closes his eyes, and Dream sees it again. The same phenomenon that had happened in that video with Patricia. A flash of blue and white, glitter and sparkles disappearing as suddenly as they appeared.

"Are you feeling better now, Tubbo?" Dr Montgomery asks.

Tubbo wipes the tear tracks from his cheeks, slapping himself once or twice. "You're really..." The lightness in his voice is back. Dream narrows his eyes. An inauthentic sort of lightness, he would think. "You're really amazing, Doctor!"

"Glad to hear that," Dr Montgomery says. It's hard to tell from her smile whether she's aware of her power or not.

"I feel ready to face anything, Dr Montgomery," Tubbo says, rising from his seat. "Is it alright if I come see you again some time?"

"Of course. My door's always open for you, Tubbo," Dr Montgomery says. With a quick wave,

Tubbo vanishes out the door with a spring in his step. Dr Montgomery frowns, looking down at the desk in mild contemplation.

[It is](#) there that the video ends, clear pictures dissolving into static once more. Dream glances over at Tubbo, who has his back turned to the television. He is the first one out of the room, with the rest of the Thieves following quietly behind him.

*

Dream inputs the correct answer into the panel and the blue screen is disabled. He leads the team through the hallway and into the next room.

[It's](#) less of a room and more like a massive courtyard, Dream would say. They're still within the building, surrounded by golden walls, hearts and stars painted on them. Lush greenery fills the area and stairs of glass allows them to ascend to platforms that lead yet further into the Palace.

What really disturbs Dream, however, is the sheer number of cognitive beings dressed fully in white hospital gowns, silly grins on their faces as they float ever higher into the sky.

"Does this mean that Dr Montgomery thinks she's a god?" Eret mumbles. "Leading everyone to their paradise."

"Probably," Sapnap says, wrinkling his nose.

Navi waves his hand, dismissing his map. "Well, this is the last stretch of her Palace. We can probably clear this place in a couple of hours."

Dream nods. "We should head back for today. I'm sure everyone's tired."

Everyone agrees. Navi points out a safe room, Dream almost missing the distortion in space against the blinding gold. The safe room is no different from the others, though it provides them an emergency rope ladder and a window that leads to the outside.

Dream unravels the ladder, the rope tumbling down the side of the building. He climbs one rung at a time, sore limbs screaming at him for relief. He hops to the ground, the rest of the Thieves right behind him.

"Let's head back, get some rest...Tubbo, you've got a competition on the twenty-fifth and the twenty-sixth, right?"

"Yeah."

"Then we'll go in again on the twenty-eighth," Dream says. He pulls out his phone and activates the Meta-Nav, welcoming the blur between the Metaverse and the real world as they take a dive through space.

"Returning to the real world. Thank you for your hard work."

*

[1/23 – SATURDAY – EVENING](#)

George: you really took a hit to the chest there

Me: im okay! Seriously!

George: As long as you know your limits

George: can't have you dying before the big heist

Me: u worry too much

George: anyway

George: good night

Me: Good night!!

For Me and For Him

Chapter Summary

between infiltration

Chapter Notes

very short chap today!

happy bday cherny!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

1/24 – SUNDAY – EVENING

“Almost a month’s passed.”

George hums.

“Remember the last time we were here?” Clay says. It’s hard to take his eyes off George. “It was before all those fucked up shit was happening.”

George chuckles at that. “All those ‘fucked up shit’ was already happening from the very start.”

Clay smiles, partly in reminiscence. “It feels like such a long time ago, but I’ve only shot a god in the face last month.”

“Shot a god in the face?” A grin creeps up George’s mouth. “You only gave me a brief run-down the other time.”

And so Clay begins his tale in greater detail this time, regaling George with the intricacies of their final stand against the god of control, Yaldabaoth. About how Igor was fake the whole time, about the Holy Grail, about the Qliphoth World, about Yaldabaoth itself.

He lifts his head to meet George’s eyes, only to find him glancing away.

“Sounds like you had a fun time.”

Clay scoffs. “Hardly.”

“Wish I could have been there.”

Clay drops his gaze. “I wish you were too.”

Neither speak for the longest time. George looks like he wants to say something, but he doesn’t. Instead, he looks at the water, at the reflection of the moon. A breeze blows by, a painful flush on Clay’s cheeks as he hugs himself.

“Well,” George says, grabbing hold of the oars. “Let’s head back. I’m sure the rental shop guy wants to get home already.”

*

1/25 – MONDAY – EVENING

Eret: Has Dr Montgomery contacted you, Clay?

Me: no

Harvey: yeah the deadlines really soon

Zak: we just gotta have faith

Eret: Still, its worrying

Me: i have her number

George: phones don’t work in the metaverse

Blade: and she spends all her time there now

Me: oh true

Harvey: we should just wait like what Zak said

Clay puts his phone down on his lap and reaches for the popcorn.

“What was that about?” Nick asks, eyes trained on the screen, but clearly disengaged.

“About why Dr Montgomery hasn’t contacted us.”

“Maybe she’s waiting for the second of February,” Floris says.

Clay hums. “That’s what Zak said too.”

They continue watching the movie in relative silence, until Clay’s phone buzzes again. He checks his messages, delighted to find one he’d been waiting for all night, just slightly different from what he’d imagined.

George: gina wants to go to the beach tomorrow

George: you coming?

Me: just me or the rest of the PT?

George: just you

Me: I don’t mind. After school?

George: yeah. No need to pack your swimsuit or anything just bring yourself

George: its winter im not getting in that water

Clay laughs as he types back a reply.

Me: okay

Me: i'll see you tomorrow

George: good night

Me: Nights!!

*

1/26 – TUESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“Why the sudden urge to come here?” Clay asks. They don’t bother going down onto the sand, opting to remain on the boardwalk. The sun peeks out through the clouds, warm rays offering respite from the cold of winter.

“Because I wanted to revisit the place where I made my vow to the Thieves,” Gina says. “This place is where I joined you guys, remember? All the way back in August?”

George folds his arms. “Uh huh. That wasn’t what you told me last night.”

Gina scowls. “Let me have my dramatic moment, George.”

George chuckles, turning to face the rolling waves.

“So, I noticed you guys are engaged in this...this battle with the Doctor,” Gina says. “I mean, she’s not *bad*, per se. Just...just...” She trails off, searching for words. “She just wants the best for everyone.”

Clay scuffs his soles against the wood. “Yeah.”

“So don’t be too harsh on her,” Gina says. She sighs. “I’m sorry I can’t be of much help, since I can’t enter *that* world and all.”

“You have nothing to apologize for, Gina,” George says, glancing over.

“I know, but...just know that I have your backs,” Gina says with the widest smile on her face. “Make sure you steal her heart, okay?”

Clay nods. He has to do it. For George, for Gina, for everyone in this world at risk of being trapped in that alternate reality forever.

Clay turns back towards the sea, towards the sun setting beneath the horizon. Time is passing by so fast. Very soon, it would be the day of reckoning. In about a week’s time.

In two days, they’d be heading back into the Palace and securing the infiltration route once and for all.

*

1/27 – WEDNESDAY – DAYTIME

“Thanks for meeting me on such short notice!”

Clay raises a hand in greeting as Tubbo steps out of his house, phone and wallet in hand. Floris scrambles up Clay’s shoulders.

“How did your competition go?” Clay asks. “Got a good chance of winning?”

“Well, I haven’t slept for about forty-eight hours until last night,” Tubbo says, rubbing his eye. “But I think I’m good now.”

They round the corner, heading to the nearby Big Bang Burger. Over burgers, fries and coke, Tubbo tells him about the experience. Fighting with so many programmers with so much potential, the tsunami of stress washing over him time and time again, wishing sometimes that he’s got the skills of his brother.

“But I remembered,” Tubbo says. “I remembered my promise with Thomas. I was gonna win this. For our dream.”

Clay nods approvingly. “When will you know the results?”

“Probably around...two weeks later?” Tubbo says, nibbling on a fry. “February the...tenth of February, I suppose?” He sighs. “We’ll have to defeat the Doctor, or we might not even *have* a tenth of February to look forward to.”

Clay finishes up his burger, crumpling the wrapper in his hand, scowling at the smear of mayonnaise on his finger. Tubbo chuckles.

“I must really thank you, Clay, for opening my eyes,” Tubbo says. “If not for you, I don’t think I would have been able to go to this competition...not as Thomas. And whatever happens, I’m gonna strive to be the top, okay? I’m gonna be the best, to fulfil the dream that Thomas never got to.”

Clay places a hand on his shoulder. “With that attitude, you’re going to go places, Tubbo.”

I am thou, thou art I. Thou has turned a vow into a blood oath. It shall become the wings of rebellion and break the yoke of thy heart. Thou has awakened to the ultimate secret of the Faith, granting thee infinite power...

A faint shape flickers behind Tubbo. It’s not Cendrillon, but a figure clad in a frilly red dress. Vanadis wears a general’s helmet, crimson eyes peeking out from below. She smiles at Clay before condensing into a blue orb, sinking down and merging with Tubbo’s soul.

Tubbo yawns. “Sorry, I’m a little tired today. The competition and all.”

“I understand.” Clay stands, dumping the trash into the bin and returning his used tray to the station. “Let’s get you home. Tomorrow’s another long day.”

*

[1/27 – WEDNESDAY – EVENING](#)

George: Good night

Me: Good night! :>

Chapter End Notes

Charm +5 (read book)

Knowledge +5 (study)

Charm +5 (watched movie)

Faith arcana rank 9 -> 10 MAX (Tubbo)

Guts +5 (ate at big bang burger)

Kindness +5 (did housework)

Laboratory of Sorrow: Infiltration Finale

Chapter Summary

twilight corridor: the final section of dr montgomery's palace

1/28 – THURSDAY – DAYTIME

The golden walls are as shiny as Dream remembers it to be. The cognitive beings floating high into the sky don't get any less creepy, no matter how many times Dream sees it.

"This way." Dream leads the team up a flight of glass steps tinged with blue, past several golden archways covered with tendrils of gnarled vines. The glass steps eventually bring them to more platforms, though there is not a single Shadow in sight. It is a good thing, because that means that Dream can focus on this strange device that has sprung up in the middle of the platform.

"What's this for?" TapL folds his arms.

The machine consists of three dials below three indication lights of different colours.

"Brown...blue and...blue," Navi tilts his head. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's red, blue and green," Fundy says. Navi groans.

At the moment, only red and blue are lit.

"Look over there," Eret says. It appears that the stairway that leads to the next platform is missing.

"Do you think..." Bad turns back towards the staircase that they came from. The blue-tinged staircase.

"Only one way to find out." Skeppy turns the dial below the blue light, watching as it blinks off. Instantly, the staircase behind them fizzle away.

"With the blue light off, the blue staircase disappears," Techno says.

Sapnap glances back at the missing flight of stairs. "And just now, the only light still off was the green one."

Skeppy turns the blue and green dials, beaming both staircases back into existence. However, green vines shoot up from the ground, the archway above them glowing a bright viridian.

"There are vines that block our path when we turn the corresponding light on," Eret says. "We've got to be careful not to block our own path."

Once the Thieves climb the staircase, headed to the next level, Dream's stomach sinks to the pit of his gut.

At least twenty platforms stand between them and their goal, a giant flight of stairs in the distance that leads to the apex of the laboratory. Several similar devices and archways decorate the chamber. Cognitive beings float ever higher into the ceiling casting a veil of light upon them.

“Oh my God,” Dream mutters. This is going to take forever. The worst part of it all is that Navi cannot help them with this puzzle. Not with him being unable to differentiate between green and blue.

“What the hell?”

As soon as Dream spins the blue dial on a platform in the middle of the room, vines grow behind them, the archway glowing a bright magenta.

“Magenta?” Tubbo turns back to the device. “There *is* no magenta on here, though.”

“Maybe it has something to do with the fact that red and blue are switched on now,” Eret says.

“Wait, but doesn’t red and blue make purple?” Skeppy asks.

“Well, technically, it does,” Bad says. “If we’re thinking art instead of light. If we’re thinking light then, red, green and blue are the primary colours. Red and green make yellow. Red and blue make magenta and green and blue make cyan.”

“Really?”

“If you took Physics, you’d know,” Fundy says.

“You don’t even go to school!”

Can they make use of this somehow? Dream *had* noticed stairs that seemed stained with colours other than red, green and blue, but had never really taken it into consideration until now.

“Let’s go,” Dream says, waving a hand.

Frustration builds quickly within the team, especially since six different colours now mean more combinations of pathways available to them.

Bad whines as they lock themselves out of a direct path to the platform with the staircase when they activate a green dial, a set of vines growing between them and the staircase to that platform, the archway above their heads glowing yellow.

“Let’s just...” Dream sighs. “Let’s just find another way around.”

Begrudgingly, the team leaves the platform and heads down the cyan staircase.

*

“Finally...made it.”

Sapnap leans against the device, watching as Dream turns the final dial. The red indication light blinks to life and a white staircase appears before them, curling around a giant tree, its canopies glowing softly with light. That’s where all the cognitive beings are headed.

The white staircase leads into the trunk of the tree, opening up to even more featureless corridors, and a blockade near its very end.

“Oh come on!”

Skeppy groans. A blue barrier keeps them from their end goal, the waver of the safe room at the end of the corridor taunting them. Dream inspects the panel, at the question on the panel.

What happened to Tammy Montgomery on the day that the sky turned red? The options being: "She showed Hans her work", "Her research was shut down", "She battled the God of Control" and "Her Persona awakened".

"Well, it's definitely not the third option," Bad says. "But we don't have enough information to choose between the other three."

"In here." On the opposite wall of the panel is a set of oak doors. Navi pushes against them, revealing a room all too familiar to them, the only light within coming from the television in the room. The static buzzes noisily in their ears.

"Is there a CD in there?" Tubbo asks.

Techno presses the play button on the player. "Only one way to find out."

Without much trouble, the static clears. The scene this time is an office, walls filled with framed certificates. A man sits behind a desk, fingers clasped in front of him. The woman standing on the other end is unmistakably Dr Montgomery. She looks older than in the past few videos. This had, perhaps, happened even recently.

"So...what brings you back here, after all these years?" The man flips through the clear binder file on his desk, gaze glossing over its contents. He closes the file and pushes it back to Dr Montgomery.

"This is a comprehensive study on the research you tried to shut down 'all these years' ago," Dr Montgomery says, obvious venom in her tone.

The man sighs. "What I meant was, why'd you decide to bring it up now?"

"This is merely a quick visit. Out of spite," Dr Montgomery says. "I wanted to show you in person that I found the 'concrete evidence' you had discontinued my research over."

The man seems to consider his words carefully. "That, I can say, is impressive. I'll give you that." He leans back against his seat. "Such praise means nothing now. All this discussion is in the past. Why can't you just move on?"

"I can't." Dr Montgomery shakes her head. "Cognitive psience has made too great an impact on the world to be abandoned like that. The sudden change of hearts, the psychotic-breakdown incidents...these can be linked back to cognitive psience. These are the 'concrete evidence' I'm talking about."

She scoops her file into her arm. "The one person pulling the strings behind this whole thing is..." She sighs, spreading an arm. "None other than congressman Markus Singh."

The man hums, averting his gaze.

"Years ago, Singh took notice of my research and stole it away from me and made others develop it for his own gain," Dr Montgomery says. "Not only that, he somehow made use of cognitive psience to induce psychotic breakdowns and mental shutdowns in people."

She smiles, a sickly sort of smile that holds no mirth. "Now, you're heavily involved in all those incidents, weren't you?"

"What do you plan on doing with me?" The man looks almost panicked, sitting bolt upright.

Dr Montgomery shakes her head. “Nothing. As I said before, I’m only here out of spite. My work is going to change the world.”

“You don’t have the money!” the man yells, rising from his seat. Fear dances on his face, evident in the furrow of his brows and the widening of his eyes as large as dinner plates. “You don’t have any influence at all! What can someone like you actually do?”

“That paper’s just the first step,” Dr Montgomery says, turning her back to him, her white coat twirling around her legs like a shroud. “I’ve learned how to change the cognition of not just an individual, but the whole of humanity. And I *will* do it, no matter how long it takes.”

The man’s chair scrapes against the floor as he sits back down. He’s schooled his expression, but his tensed shoulders betray his worry. “Enough of this drivel. Get out of my office! I don’t want to see your face ever again!”

It is at that moment that the sky outside turns a grotesque shade of red, colouring the skies and staining the cityscape. Red rain begins to pour from the clouds. Dr Montgomery glances back, raising her brows at the sight.

“What?” The man turns his head, glaring at the window, before turning back to her. “What’re you looking at?”

“You don’t see that?” Dr Montgomery sounds more curious than anything. When the man does not respond, she hums and turns back to the door. “It’s...It’s nothing.”

Dr Montgomery pauses, staring at the strange figure that has appeared in front of her, cable-like vines striped with veins protruding from its body.

“The time has come.” A deep voice resounds through the room. “I am the other you, dwelling within the hearts of man.”

“The other me?” Dr Montgomery wrinkles her forehead. “Wait...” She drops her gaze. “Within the hearts of men...”

“You may have no knowledge of it, but I have been at your side longer than our current meeting,” the deep voice continues. “Finally, your reality and the sea of hearts from which I came have truly become one in this moment.”

This must be Azathoth, judging from its form. “Now – the time for your unjustly persecuted ideology is at hand. I am thou, thou art I.”

With that, Azathoth fades into a blue sphere which fuses with Dr Montgomery’s soul, just like the rest of the Personas had for the other Thieves. Dr Montgomery lifts a hand, laying her palm flat on her chest.

“I understand now. To think that it’ll be so...” She chuckles before striding out of the room, the door clicking shut behind her.

With that, the scene ceases to be and the static returns. Dream takes a step back. Both Navi and Techno appear to be varying degrees of discomfort. The other Thieves stand still, thoughtful.

“So Singh really *was* behind her research getting stopped.” Bad is the first to speak.

“Yeah.” Dream nods. “Come on.” He heads out the door. “Let’s go and input that last answer.”

Dream taps the correct option on the panel, unlocking the final barrier and allowing them passage. It is there that they reach the final safe room. Dream shuts the door once everyone's inside.

[The](#) seats are a relief for their sore feet. Dream sinks into the hard, wooden bench, beside Navi, who's been quiet all this time.

"What's wrong?"

"Hmm? Nothing." Navi presses his lips together in a thin line, drawing up his map, pretending to be engrossed in it.

"Hey." Dream looks around at the others, who seem to be minding their own business. "You can talk to me, you know?"

Navi still refuses to speak.

Dream leans back against the backrest of the couch, humming a tune to himself. If Navi doesn't want to tell him, he can't force him. Meanwhile, he observes the other Thieves. Tubbo, Fundy and Eret are engaged in conversation. Techno is picking at his cuticles. TapL, Sapnap, Skeppy and Bad are arguing about something or other.

It's as if...they're...giving them privacy.

Dream tries not to think about it too hard. This is the second final time they'd be in the Metaverse. The next time they're coming back to the Metaverse would be on the third of February. Only a couple of days away.

He basks in the feeling, this *secret* that he shares with only this group of people. He wonders if the other Thieves are thinking the same. Whether they'd miss this life of danger, this life of exhilaration. Maybe not Tubbo, since he's just joined, but especially for himself, Sapnap, Fundy and Bad, who have been at this for about a year...

Dream pushes that thought to the back of his head and closes his eyes.

*

["Dream?"](#) Dream. It's time to go."

Dream awakens to someone shaking his shoulder. His eyes spring open. Navi is the one who woke him, the rest of the Thieves also preparing to leave.

"Wait...what? Did I actually...?" Dream mumbles groggily. He blinks, shifting his mask so that he can clear the crust from the corners of his eyes.

"Yeah." Navi stands, offering him a hand. "Let's go."

Dream takes Navi's hand and pulls himself to his feet. Together with the others, they head out of the safe room and back into the final corridor.

Turning left, the team boards an elevator that takes them even higher, shooting past glittering corridors, rising even higher and higher and higher, until it grinds to a halt at the penultimate platform, big enough to house what must be thousands upon thousands of cognitive beings.

This must be the so-called paradise that Dr Montgomery has "guided" the masses to. A podium in the middle of this platform houses a tiny sapling. Floating above the sapling, however, is the foggy

cloud of the Treasure that has yet to take form.

They've done it. They've reached the end of the Palace. They've secured the infiltration route. Now all that's left is to send the calling card and steal the Treasure on February the third, finally waking the world from their dream reality, returning the world to what it should be.

"Alright then," Dream says, turning back to his team with the widest smile on his face. "Now all we have to do is to wait for Dr Montgomery to contact us and we give her the calling card. Easy." He turns to Skeppy. "Can you get the calling card done by next...Monday? Then we can give it to her on Tuesday, the second."

Skeppy nods, saluting him.

"Everyone, this is our final heist. We've gotta go out with a bang!" Dream pumps his fist into the air. Sapnap and Fundy mirror his confidence with enthusiastic cheers, while the other Thieves smile and clap. "Make sure your preparations are sound. We only have one shot at this."

The Thieves are in agreement. At Dream's command, they head back to the safe room, where they return to the entrance through an emergency exit. Dream pulls out his phone and activates the Meta-Nav. He will surely miss this message.

"Returning to the real world. Thank you for your hard work."

*

1/28 – THURSDAY – EVENING

"You did well, George."

George jolts, glancing up from his phone, before dropping his gaze again. "Mhm."

"I mean it."

George nods. "I was useless at the last puzzle."

"No, you weren't."

George grits his teeth. "No need to mince your words, Clay."

"Look." Clay places a hand on his shoulder. "No one's perfect. That's why we've got to work together to cover each other's weaknesses."

George sighs, a hand on Clay's and moving his away from his shoulder. "Sorry. Got a little carried away."

"No, it's fine." Clay frowns.

"Enough about me," George says, voice low. He fixes Clay with the most serious look on his face. "Clay."

Clay tenses.

"You must promise me one thing." George turns to face him. "You have to promise me just one thing, okay?"

Where's this coming from?

“You must promise me that when you meet with the Doctor, no matter what she says to you, you have to make the right choice.”

“What do you-“

“Promise me!” George snarls. “You have to promise me, Clay.”

Clay nods dumbly. Of course he’d promise him. He’d promise George the world if he asked.

“Say it!”

“I promise!” Clay shouts. “Cross my heart and hope to die!”

George seems satisfied now. “Good.”

“What’s taking the two of you so long?” Nick calls. “My mom’s gonna be really pissed, Clay!”

“Coming!” Clay turns back to George, who offers a small smile of reassurance before making his way towards the bus stop. Clay mulls over George’s cryptic words as he pads over to Nick.

What can he possibly mean?

Make Your Choice: 2/2

Chapter Summary

the final decision you have to make

Chapter Notes

we're back with another make your choice chap!

this is the final one. whether you get the good ending or the true ending is up to you...

2/2 – TUESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“Clay, may I speak to you today?”

Clay blinks. He’s just about to head home, to prepare for the big day tomorrow. Tubbo catches him just as he’s stepped out of the school gates.

“Sure,” Clay says, tilting his head. “Do you wanna go somewhere?”

They end up making their way to Helen Park, settling at a picnic bench in the middle of a clearing.

“What’s this all about?” Clay asks.

“Well, I’d just like to thank you again,” Tubbo says, “and maybe...just to have a little pep talk before the big battle.”

“Right.”

“Tomorrow, we’re going to be facing Dr Montgomery,” Tubbo says. “It’s still hard to believe, I’ll be honest.”

“Yeah.” Clay nods. It would be for Tubbo, but for the other Thieves who’d faced a god, they’d just do what they always did. Send the calling card, steal their Treasure, and beat Dr Montgomery down like they did every other target.

“And I’d like to thank you again,” Tubbo says. “No matter what decision you make today, Clay, I will stand behind you.”

No matter what decision he makes? There’s only one decision *to* make, one ending *to* choose.

“I just want you to know that I trust you,” Tubbo says. “So do us proud, leader.”

Clay smiles and notices the faint flare of blue behind Tubbo. It’s surprising, really. Tubbo had only just awakened to Vanadis. Now, a new Persona stands behind him, dressed in a white gown, flowers in her hair. Ella twirls on her toes, does a spectacular pirouette as she fades away, a blue

sphere that fuses with Tubbo's soul.

"Thanks for being there for me," Tubbo says. "Now, I think the both of us should be getting home and getting some rest. I'll see you tomorrow, Clay!"

Clay smiles and waves as Tubbo runs off first towards the bus stop.

"Your phone's vibrating," Floris says.

Clay reaches for the device and unlocks it immediately upon seeing the notifications.

Dr Montgomery: May I meet you tonight, Clay? Somewhere private, I hope. Do bring George along as well.

*

2/2 – TUESDAY – EVENING

"Hey."

Clay toes his shoes off and strides into George's house. This place holds a lot of fond memories of their Phantom Thieves meetings, hangouts with George and Gina, for instance. Speaking of which...

"Is Gina...?"

"Asleep," George says. He offers Clay a cup of tea. Clay wraps his fingers around it, letting its warmth seep into his very being. George sits opposite him, furrowing his brows.

"What's wrong?" Clay asks. George shakes his head, pushing a plate of crumpets towards him.

"Remember what you promised me?" George says. "On the day we secured the infiltration route?"

"Yeah. That I must make the right decision no matter what Dr Montgomery said to me." The right decision...Tubbo had mentioned something about that too.

George hums.

Clay has just finished his crumpet when the doorbell rings, and George stands to answer it. The door swings open and Dr Montgomery steps in, dressed in a fleece coat, a white shirt underneath, jeans hugging her legs. George takes the seat beside Clay, and Dr Montgomery settles on the other side of the table.

"Why did you need George here?" Clay asks. "This is between me and you, Dr Montgomery."

Dr Montgomery sips at her tea. The clink her cup makes against the saucer resonates in the room.

"First, I must ask you," Dr Montgomery says with a wistful smile on her face. "Do you still wish to reject my offer for an alternate reality, Clay?"

"Of course," Clay says, without hesitation. "No one wants to live in that kind of reality, Dr Montgomery. No one."

Dr Montgomery shakes her head, sadness in her inquiring eyes. "I really do not wish to fight, Clay. I would prefer we resolve this peacefully."

“Dr Montgomery,” Clay says, resolve unwavering. “We can’t accept this reality.”

Dr Montgomery’s smile doesn’t disappear. Instead, she nods at George. “Are you sure about that, Clay? You seem perfectly happy living in your alternate reality.”

“No I’m not,” Clay says, furrowing his brows. “I’m living in the real world. Not your alternate reality...”

“Don’t you dare.” George grits his teeth.

“The only one who hasn’t broken free of this spell is...you,” Dr Montgomery says. “And George...well...why do you think he’s alive again?”

Clay’s eyes widen. “No...”

“I don’t want it to seem like I’m holding him hostage,” Dr Montgomery says, placing her finished teacup back onto its saucer. “But if that’s what it takes for you to reconsider.”

“This is a new low, Doctor,” George growls, and Clay has never seen him this angry. “How can you bring yourself to stoop to this level?”

“I’m not above using whatever tactics I can to achieve my dream, George,” Dr Montgomery says delicately. She stands and thanks him for the tea. “I will await you in my Palace tomorrow, Clay. If you do not come, then I’m going to assume that you have accepted the reality that I’m offering you. You may stay with your friends, living the life you dream of living. You may live without having to worry about anything.”

“You...” Clay reaches into his bag, slipping out the final card, its borders striped with red and black, newspaper and magazine cut-outs of letters splashed across the screen. He swallows the lump in his throat. “You forgot this.”

Dr Montgomery plucks the card from Clay’s fingers. She glances over its contents, and nods. “I will be waiting, Clay, whether you decide to show up or not.”

With that, she leaves, vanishing out the door, her coat flapping behind her as the door swings shut.

“George...” Clay hates the crack in his voice.

“Clay.” There is a warning tone in George’s voice. “You promised me.”

“Is this what you meant?” Clay asks, struggling to keep his breathing steady. “Is this what you meant by ‘no matter what Dr Montgomery says’?”

George clenches his fists and unclenches them. He sighs, running a hand through his hair. “Yes.”

“I...” He promised George. “But if I...” Yet if he goes through with the heist... “George, you...”

“I don’t want to live under another person’s control ever again, Clay,” George says, a tic in his jaw. He looks so tired suddenly, with his sagged shoulders and his cheek resting against his palm.

“Don’t you think that what Singh did to me was enough?”

“But...you won’t even feel it,” Clay says. Stop. Don’t... You *promised* him. “You won’t even feel it, George. You...*We* can be happy.”

“Clay.”

Clay snaps his head up. George is staring straight into his eyes, the trust swirling in his own, golden flecks meeting the brown.

“I want to hear your answer. From your own mouth,” George says. “Are you going to give in to Dr Montgomery?”

“But...”

“No ‘but’s, Clay. Answer me.”

Clay bites his lip. If he accepts Dr Montgomery’s reality, they can be together. He won’t have to go back home and he can live his life out here in Fariold, with the people he cares about most. He can live here with *George*. They can finally have a normal life.

But he promised. He promised George. He promised George that no matter what Dr Montgomery said, he’d make the right choice. He’d go through with the heist.

Clay opens his mouth, his answer on the tip of his tongue. This is his last chance.

[“I will accept Dr Montgomery’s proposal.”](#)

[“I can’t accept this reality.”](#)

An Ideal Reality

Chapter Summary

this is your happy reality.

Chapter Notes

this is the choice you made.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

2/2 – TUESDAY – EVENING

George's expression darkens. He stands abruptly, legs of the chair scraping against the marble of the floor.

"This is essentially a betrayal of my wishes. Were those empty words, Clay?" George snarls. "Our promise...did it mean nothing to you?"

"It's not that! I...I would-" Clay hangs his head in shame, but he cannot do it. He just *can't*. This is *George* they're talking about. This is the person he cares about most in the world.

"You would *what*, Clay?"

"I can't lose you after getting you back again!" Clay burst out, the tears springing to his eyes. His nose sours and he hiccups. Why must the world be so cruel? Why must the fates rip George away from him after giving him back? The universe is taunting him, giving Clay a breath of fresh air in the middle of the ocean, before dunking him back into the water, surrounded by the chill of the sea, back to floundering despairingly like a drowning man.

"Well, now you're going to lose me for good, Clay," George says, nothing but poison in his voice. Clay can hardly stand to look at him, at the disappointment...no, the *hatred* on George's face.

"Starting tomorrow, I will only be a puppet of myself. A hollow shell. Like all those people out there."

"I..."

"Save your breath." George stabs a finger at the door. "Get out. Now."

Clay drags his feet to the door. Did he make the right choice? George is mad at him, but this is for his own good too, right? This way, George doesn't have to lose his life. Gina doesn't have to lose her brother. Clay doesn't have to lose the person he cares about most in the world. He's given up too much. Sacrificed too much.

He closes the door behind him and peers up at the sky. It's snowing tonight. He can *feel* the Metaverse encroaching on the world. It's almost done. The fusion, that is.

Tomorrow, he'd feel nothing but happiness. He'd see nothing but smiles. He won't have to suffer anymore. Wouldn't have to go through strife anymore.

And neither will anyone else.

*

2/3 – WEDNESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“Hey!”

Clay holds up a hand in greeting as he enters the diner, where the others are studying. Eret, Harvey and Blade are preparing for their SATs, hard at work. Zak and Darryl are feeding each other cupcakes while arguing about something or other.

Harvey lifts his head. “Where’s Floris?”

“At Elytra. He’s picking up some stuff for Gina,” Clay says.

“Neil?”

“Club.” Nick places his bag down on the seat. Clay sits beside him, taking out his schoolwork to review. As soon as he gets his pencil case out, however, his head is wracked with a terrible ache.

Why am I here?

Clay blinks. What was that? He glances around at his friends. Wait a second...they all seem to be forgetting something important here...

“You okay? You seem pretty out of it,” George asks, placing a hand on Clay’s, twining their fingers together.

Clay stares at him for a good few seconds. “Where’s...where’s Dr Montgomery? What happened with her?”

“Dr Montgomery?” George tilts his head. “Who’s that?”

“Hey, exam season’s round the corner,” Eret says. “Your mom can be pretty scary if she wants to be.”

“Yeah, remember what she did to Neil last time?” Nick grins, and the group laughs.

Clay dips his head, the uncertainty gaining on him. Perhaps they were in a complicated situation. Perhaps he made a choice.

Perhaps this is for the best.

*

2/3 – WEDNESDAY – EVENING

“Clay?”

Clay looks up from where he’s nose-deep in his books in an effort to perform well for the upcoming examinations. Floris, on the other hand, is sitting on the couch, remote in hand, watching anime with Nick and Neil. Damn those smartasses.

Mrs Armstrong approaches him with a bright smile on her face. “Do you mind if we talk about... about something? Outside?”

Clay nods. He abandons his books and heads out to the porch with Mrs Armstrong. Spring is just around the corner...after a few more weeks or so. Already, it’s getting just that warmer. Clay shivers as a draft breezes by them, and he takes that all back.

“It sure has been a long year, hasn’t it?” Mrs Armstrong says, brushing a lock of hair from her face.

“It has.”

“I was thinking,” Mrs Armstrong says, with the energy of a young schoolgirl. Clay has never seen her quite this excited before. “I was thinking about inviting you to stay here. At least...until you finish high school. Or maybe even after graduating.”

“But my parents...”

“I’ll talk to them about it,” Mrs Armstrong says. “If you’d like it, that is.”

“I...” Things are finally looking up. Clay grins. “I’d love to.”

“Great! I guess I’ll get the ball rolling this coming Saturday, then!” Mrs Armstrong practically skips back into the house.

Something’s wrong...

Clay shakes his head. No. Nothing’s wrong. This is how it’s meant to be. This is...the perfect reality...?

His phone buzzes. It’s a message from George.

George: Wanna go to the aquarium on Sunday? I got tickets

He types back a reply as rapidly as his fingers allow him.

Me: Of course

Almost immediately, his phone vibrates again.

George: great. See you!

George: also, good night!

Clay is unable to wipe that dopey smile off his face.

Me: Good night to u too!

He locks his phone and returns to the warmth of the house. The group at the couch has already switched to playing Switch games. Clay glances from his books to the laughing trio.

Exams can wait.

*

2/14 – SUNDAY – DAYTIME

“I got you a gift.”

“Well, so did I.” Clay leans in and presses a kiss to George’s temple. George grins, shoving the wrapped present into Clay’s hands. He holds his hand out expectantly for his, which Clay deposits onto his waiting palm.

Clay can hardly wait to open it. He tears the wrapping paper apart with the utmost caution, taking care not to rip into it desperately. He’d like to think that he has some sort of finesse.

“Chocolate, really?” George tries to suppress a smile but fails. It’s not just any chocolate. It’s a heart-shaped chocolate with George’s name spelt on it in delicious white chocolate icing, a tiny smiley face at the end a nice touch. Clay made it himself...with Darryl’s help, of course.

“It’s Valentine’s Day,” Clay says, pouting. He unwraps the gift fully. It’s a locket, a golden one in the shape of a heart, with a tinier heart carved into its centre. He nearly sheds tears when he sees a photograph of the both of them placed carefully in the locket.

It’s perfect in every sense of the word.

“Unoriginal, I know, but at least it’s more original than *chocolate*.”

“George!” Clay whines. George laughs. “For that, you owe me a kiss.”

George is more than happy to oblige. When they part, their lips are swollen, their lungs breathless, bodies trembling with excitement, anticipation. Expectation of something...more.

“Let’s not...get ahead of ourselves,” Clay says, struggling to catch his breath. They’re in public, for goodness’ sake. “Come on. I’ve got something else for you.”

He grabs George’s wrist and drags him towards the train station. He’s positively glowing. He *knows* George is going to love this.

This is, by far, the best reality...

*

2/14 – SUNDAY – EVENING

“This is really nice.”

“Isn’t it?” Clay says, smiling. A candlelit dinner at one of the most expensive restaurants in the city, a small bouquet of roses between them, amazing cuisine...

“I didn’t think you’d have class.”

Clay kicks him under the table playfully. George kicks back. All of a sudden, an announcement booms from the speakers in the ceiling.

“Good evening! We’d like to thank everyone who’s here and we hope you are enjoying your meal! As we all know, today’s Valentine’s Day!”

“What’s this?” George whispers.

“I have no idea.”

“You booked the place.”

Clay doesn't get to respond, because the announcer continues. "And now, for our Valentine's Day special! We wish all you lovebirds a beautiful future ahead!"

The curtains beside them begins to rise, revealing what must be the most gorgeous scenery that Clay's ever seen. The cityscape is all lit up from the billboards, the large signs, the skyscrapers and small buildings...The moon is visible, weaving through thin strips of clouds.

"This is...oh my God."

Clay props his elbow on the table, food forgotten. He rests his cheek against his palm, unable to take his eyes off George. George, who's literally sparkling, staring at the view, eyes flicking from corner to corner of the city, drinking in the sights.

At the very end of it all, George is still the most beautiful person, beating any sort of scenery that the world can present them.

Clay sighs. He doesn't want this day to end. He wishes they can freeze this moment, remain trapped in time forever. He doesn't mind, not if it means that he can stare at George for eternity.

This is...the perfect...reality.

*

[3/15 – MONDAY – DAYTIME](#)

"Yo!" Harvey screeches, jumping from the stairs, landing harshly on the ground, diploma in hand. Eret emerges from the building, speaking with Tubbo and Neil.

"Congratulations!" Floris cries, reaching over and hugging Eret. "I wish I could graduate too..."

"You've still got one more year ahead of you," Eret says, releasing Floris from the hug. He glances over at Tubbo. "Two years for you."

"Man." Tubbo laughs. "I wish I could graduate, like, right now."

Clay notices Blade rounding the corner, his own diploma in hand.

"How'd you know where to find us?" Clay asks.

"You guys cause a ruckus in front of your school gates and you're asking that question?" Blade chuckles.

"Fair enough."

"I can't believe it," Darryl says, tears in his eyes. "Our seniors are finally graduating!"

"Yeah! Watch out, college! I'm coming for you, baby!" Harvey cries, pumping a fist in the air.

"Oh my God!" Zak runs up with Gina in tow, out of breath. "You guys...you guys gave me the wrong time!"

"The ceremony just ended early," George says, shrugging. "We would have waited for you."

"Anyway, let's take a group picture!" Gina cries. "That's what everyone does, right? Take a group picture at times like these?"

“Definitely,” Clay says. He frowns as he holds out his phone as far as his arm can reach. “But there are so many of us. We can’t all fit in the camera.”

“Maybe I can help.”

A feminine voice catches Clay off guard. For some reason, he recognizes that voice. Whose voice is it...? He turns to find a woman in a denim dress walking up to them, her hands in her pockets, wearing a strange white coat upon her shoulders. It reminds Clay of a scientist’s lab coat.

“Would you...?” Eret asks with a polite smile. She nods and receives the phone from him. The group lines up in front of the school, giant smiles on their faces, arms slung around each other, diplomas held out for the camera. A couple of snaps later, they break apart, and Eret retrieves the phone.

“Will these do?” The woman asks.

Clay’s head begins to throb. He grasps at his temple. What’s happening? Is it her voice? Is Clay supposed to remember her? He watches Eret step away from her and proceed to show them the photographs. Meanwhile, the woman spins on her heels and walks back down the street.

How strange.

“You look stupid,” Floris says, ruffling Neil’s hair.

“No I don’t!”

The group laughs. Clay joins in, pushing that invasive thought to the back of his head. It hurts, but if Clay stops thinking about it, the hurting will stop too. He smiles with his friends, pure bliss enveloping him and driving all those negative feelings away.

This is the perfect reality.

Chapter End Notes

hope you enjoyed your good ending!

if you'd prefer the true ending, just head on over to the next chapter!

A Painful Reality

Chapter Summary

this is your painful reality.

Chapter Notes

this is the choice you made.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

2/2 – TUESDAY – EVENING

The words hurt.

Like a stab to the heart.

It tears Clay apart yet puts a smile on George's face. How? How does George accept this reality so easily? How can he smile like that, like Clay just did him a favour?

"Thank you." George says, sincerity in his voice. "I knew I was right to trust you, Clay."

When Clay looks up at George, he sees the faint shape of a new Persona, a triangular spaceship glowing with green symbols along its borders and wings. Al Azif does a little loop-the-loop before disappearing, sinking into George's being and merging with his soul.

"I guess we should get some rest for tomorrow," George says, standing. "It's going to be a big day."

Clay snuffles. He drops his gaze, his vision blurring. He wipes at his cheeks, every coherent thought thrown out of the window. His chest constricts, his heart throbbing with every beat.

"Clay?"

Clay can hardly hear him with the blood rushing through his ears. There is a hand on his shoulder, a gentle palm against his cheek, thumbing away the tears.

"Come on. We need all the sleep we can get. The trains are going to stop running soon."

"George!" Clay cries, voice cracking. "Please!"

It takes George aback. Silence reigns between them. Dream drops his forehead against the crook of George's shoulder, taking a deep breath. His arms wind around George's middle, drawing George closer to him, relishing in the feel, the warmth, of George's body against his.

"If I'm going to lose you..." Clay can hardly get his words out. "If I'm going to lose you again... can't you let me be selfish just this one night?"

For the first time in a long while, George is stunned, speechless. Clay's chest heaves, fingers digging into George's back, clinging onto him like his life depends on it.

He only has one night. One night left with George. Once tomorrow's over...Clay doesn't want to think about it.

"Clay."

George's voice is softer. He returns the hug, a hand ruffling Clay's hair. Clay has no idea how long they've stayed together, how long he's been crying into his shoulder, how long he's basked in the slow circles George rubs against his back.

"I'm so proud of you."

George drags him from the seat, arms still tight around him. Clay can almost hear George's heartbeat, thumping in time with his own, to the same melodious rhythm they've spun for themselves, and for them only.

To his surprise, George doesn't kick him out. Instead, he allows Clay to slump against him. Exhaustion sapped his strength from him, leaving his legs as wobbly as jelly. George leads Clay up to the second floor, opening the door to his room.

The place smells of George, a comforting scent that brings more tears to Clay's eyes. George sits him down on the bed, and Clay can only stare blankly up at him, robbed of all emotion. George cups his face, kissing his forehead lightly.

"George?" Clay croaks out.

"I lied when I said that I didn't care about you...back at that engine room," George whispers. "Those feelings never truly faded, Clay."

The realization hits Clay like a bolt of lightning, coursing through his blood. His heart stutters as he searches for words, forcing them past his parched throat.

"Then why..." Clay gasps. "Why now? Of all times?"

"I didn't want our last memory to be..." George trails kisses down Clay's cheek as Clay clings to him. "I didn't want it to be a sad one. I wanted to leave you with only the happy times. I was never going to tell you, Clay, then the Doctor...When the truth was revealed..."

Clay opens his mouth to speak, but George silences him with a press of his lips against Clay's. It's a short kiss, and when they part, Clay scrabbles for him, wanting more. Wanting so much more than what they *can* have. George removes Clay's hands, heading on over to his closet to pick out a change of clothes.

It's strange to be the one taken care of, when he's been the one taking care of others all this while. George's clothes are soft, the scent of detergent and *comfort* wafting around him.

"I'll let Nick know you'll be staying the night," George says, reaching for his phone. Clay watches, forcing himself to memorise George's face, eyes trailing along every contour, every sharp angle. After tomorrow, all he'll have left to remember George by will be his memories and photographs. He will never be able to hear his voice again, never be able to wrap his arms around him nuzzle into his neck and...

A hand on Clay's shoulder pushes him against the bed. Clay's barely registers the fluff of the

pillow beneath his head as George settles down beside him, trailing fingers along Clay's cheek, brushing away the tears before gathering Clay into his arms. Putting the pieces back together, mending what has been shattered into a million shards with a single touch.

"I'm here, Clay. I'm here."

Clay shuts his eyes, burying his face in George's chest. Just for tonight. Just for one night, let them be selfish. Let them have the world to themselves.

George kisses his hair, low voice lulling Clay into a deep slumber.

"Good night, Clay. I love you."

*

2/3 – WEDNESDAY – EARLY MORNING

Clay wakes up with an arm curled around a warm, breathing body. The rush of emotion and memories return to him like a blizzard, the ice spreading within him from the inside. The seed of despair germinates, bringing agony like a festering wound that refuses to heal.

George is still asleep, a hand under his head, the other tossed over Clay's torso. Clay wants to pretend that today isn't that day, that they have more time together.

He recalls the times that George had listened to him make plans for the future, reminisced the past with Clay while harbouring those...those *feelings* within. How painful had it been for him, knowing full well that should they go through with the heist, those dreams can never come true? That after February the third, he would cease to exist?

George had been so inexplicably calm about it when Clay would have been driven insane.

"George! Wake up! Breakfast! I'm hungry!" A sudden rapping of knuckles on the door jolts both Clay and George fully awake. George blinks rapidly, rubbing the last of sleep from his eyes.

"Right. Breakfast." George yawns, sitting up on the bed. "Come on, let's wash up. I have a spare toothbrush you can use."

Clay stands allowing George to grasp his wrist and lead him over to the toilets. It's rather domestic, Clay can't help but think. They wash their faces, brush their teeth and change out into more comfortable clothes.

"Mind making a pot of tea?" George asks. "I'm gonna help Gina get downstairs."

Clay nods stiffly. He climbs down the stairs and makes for the kitchen, boiling a kettle of water and preparing the tea leaves. He glances up at the tapping of footsteps, watching as George carries Gina down to the dining room.

"Clay? You're here?" Gina looks surprised, eyes wide.

"Yeah. We've got a big battle today," George says, tousling her hair. "And it's the final one. After today, you won't have anything to worry about anymore."

Clay wonders if George has already told her, or if she's already figured it out for herself. Clay helps George prepare the croissants and they gather around the table, chatting with crispy bread in hand dripping with too much jam.

Clay notices the innocuous clock on the wall, second hand ticking away ever so noisily.

Tick...tick...tick...

He shakes the thought out of his head. In a matter of hours, they'd be inside Dr Montgomery's Palace once again. He's got to make a final check of their gear and contact his team. Then, they'll be ready.

And Clay can finally put his life of Phantom Thievery behind him.

Chapter End Notes

lol angst galore you've officially sealed george's fate with ur own hands

i think i shed a few tears once writing this >~<

the story will continue! that was the final "make your choice" chapter and now you're on the road to the true ending!

Laboratory of Sorrow: I Believe

Chapter Summary

stealing the final treasure

Chapter Notes

entering the final battle with dr montgomery!

first day of lessons today...i already have an 800 word science essay due by like next week...

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

2/3 – WEDNESDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“Here we are.”

Dream stands outside Dr Montgomery’s Palace. The security level is through the roof; Dream can even feel it from out here. He clenches his fists. This is the final showdown. They are here to save the world, and to erase the Metaverse once and for all.

For once, the safe room doesn’t feel as safe as Dream would like. He throws the door open, revealing a Shadow at the very end of the corridor.

“Intruder spotted!”

“Let’s go!” Dream waves a hand and the group rushes towards the elevator. TapL sends a grenade at the Shadow, impeding its movement with a cloud of dust and smoke. This buys the Thieves enough time to get on the elevator, the golden floating pavilion taking them straight up to where the Treasure is located.

However, when they arrive, all that they see is a massive tree trunk in its place formed from gnarled tendrils of stalks and vines, reaching even higher into the sky. A set of stairs spiral around the trunk, providing them a convenient path to the top.

Dream takes the lead, taking the steps two at a time, body somehow lighter, his muscles pumping harder. Leaves rustle in his face as he enters the canopy. Golden fruits hang from the branches and overgrowth which Clay brushes aside, revealing a blue platform covered by cables flickering with blue and turquoise.

[Dr](#) Montgomery stands at the far end of the platform, her back to them, dressed in robes of gold and bronze. In her hand, she holds an unlit torch. Is that her Treasure?

“So, you’ve come.”

Dream nods. “We’ve decided. We can’t accept your reality, Dr Montgomery.”

Montgomery hums. She spins on her heels, Azathoth manifesting and solidifying behind her. It's the first time that Dream has actually considered its size. It's massive, towering over them, slithering tentacles buzzing and flashing with blue.

"I had hoped to settle this without conflict, Clay." Dr Montgomery says sadly, shaking her head. "However, it appears that that notion is being challenged." She looks up at them. "Why? Why can't you see that I'm bringing joy to everyone? That I'm relieving them of their pain?"

"But you're robbing us of our opportunity to grow as people," Bad cries.

"We learn through our experiences," Eret says. "By suffering hardships, by seeking ways to improve ourselves...if everyone can do that, then we will grow as a species."

"Then what about those who are happy to remain in bliss?" Dr Montgomery says. Azathoth's tentacles shoot out at lightning speed and stab the ceiling. "What if they were ready to end it all before I gave them a reason to live?"

Dream grits his teeth.

"There are more people like that out there than you think," Dr Montgomery says, her voice resonating throughout the tiny chamber. "People willing to sacrifice anything for a sliver of what you take for granted."

[The](#) attack comes out of nowhere. White beams of light rain from above, striking at the Phantom Thieves. Navi responds immediately, summoning Al Azif and shielding the party with a barrier of green and black. The light is strong enough to crack and shatter the barrier into millions of shards, scattering along the ground and dissolving into pixie dust.

The Thieves spring into action, each Thief drawing their weapons and rushing Dr Montgomery. She puts up a good fight, commanding Azathoth's tentacles like she would another part of her body. Dream tumbles and rolls, doing backflips and somersaults. They hardly have any time to react, not when Azathoth seems intent on murdering them at any cost.

"Tubbo! Aren't you tired of living in the shadow of your brother? Why not *become* him? I can grant you that wish!"

Tubbo throws out a white veil of light to meet Azathoth's next attack, blocking the blast of white for the team.

"I don't want that anymore!" Tubbo shouts. "I can achieve things for myself! I'm my own person!"

TapL and Sapnap cut through the tentacles like vines in a forest, clearing a path for Techno to glide ahead on Agnes, Eret riding behind him with Hereward's arrows at the ready.

"Blade. Eret." Dr Montgomery spreads her arms out. "I can give you the acceptance from your peers and colleagues that you so desperately crave. Why won't you accept my reality?"

"Don't shoot!" Navi shouts.

Azathoth's tentacles form a shield instantly between them and Dr Montgomery.

"What?" Techno jerks at the handlebars and Agnes spins, almost throwing Eret off. Hereward misfires, the arrow of light ricocheting off the ground and stabbing Techno in the shoulder. Techno winces, reaching up and plucking the arrow from his flesh. Agnes skids, flickering as Techno loses control for a moment, sending both passengers sprawling onto the ground.

"We won't bow down to you!" Eret cries. "We'll *earn* that respect ourselves!"

Dream summons Baal and sends a whirlwind at Dr Montgomery, reinforcing Fundy's twin tornadoes, wind blades slicing through most of Azathoth's tentacles.

"Floris...I thought you wished to be human. It is within my power to grant you what you want..."

Dr Montgomery throws out a hand and another tentacle answers her call. It shields her, taking most of the damage for her.

"Behind you!"

Dream turns around. A tentacle has crept up on Fundy and himself from behind. It zips through the air as the duo leap out of its way. The tentacle stabs a crater in the ground, Dream and Fundy landing safely on opposite ends of the chamber.

"I don't want that anymore!" Fundy yells. "I may not be human, but I can still have an amazing group of friends who love me for who I am!"

With so many tentacles in the way, there's no way the team can get to the heart of it all. Every time they try to launch an attack on Dr Montgomery herself, one of those tentacles is there. It's always there.

"What now?" Skeppy asks, his back bumping against Dream's, both of them surrounded by more and more tentacles shimmering with a blend of angry blue and white.

Skeppy makes short work of the tentacles that reach for them. Dream summons Yoshitsune, slicing through the multitude of tentacles aiming for him.

Is there some way to get rid of them all at once? Unlike the ones in Mementos, these tentacles don't seem immune to any one element...

"Dream!"

Bad and Techno emerge from the curtain of tentacles, having burned several away. Navi hovers above them, Al Azif humming with unintelligible sounds.

"I've got an idea," Dream says. "And I'm going to need the help of all five of you."

*

"Tubbo!"

Tubbo eradicates a tentacle with a pillar of light. Sapnap smashes through a couple more, cudgel crackling with electricity. Fundy slices the rest with blades of wind, allowing the trapped group to meet up with Dream and company.

"Dream!" Tubbo cries.

"Behind you!"

Dream spins, only to see a tentacle crumbling before him, leaving an arrow of light behind bathed in pink light. It had been shot from the side. He glances over at Eret and TapL who run over to them. The team is back together again.

"Everyone! Keep as close as you can to each other! Skeppy! In the centre!"

“Wha-?” TapL starts, but Tubbo’s already grasping his wrist and pulling him over. Techno sends his biggest cyan bomb at Dr Montgomery and Bad quickly follows up with a gigantic fireball.

Both of them hop back towards the group, Skeppy stomping the ground and forcing a dome of ice around them. Navi hovers above them, Al Azif charging and strengthening the barrier with his own dome of green.

The fireball and nuclear bomb collide and the resulting explosion is something so massive, so blinding that Dream has to duck his head, hand over his eyes, to keep from getting them seared off.

“Now!” Navi shouts.

Dream’s eyes spring open, noticing the relieving *lack* of tentacles surrounding them, most of them having been burned away by the nuclear bomb explosion. Finally, after so long, Dream can see Azathoth and the Doctor herself, both of them reeling from the unexpected explosion. Skeppy shatters the dome of ice.

The Thieves begin an all-out attack, summoning their Personas and drawing their weapons, firing all manner of elements that Dream can imagine. Fireballs, icicle spears, bolts of electricity, blades of wind, arrows of light, spheres of pink, bombs of cyan and veils of light. Dream himself joins in on the onslaught with swirling voids of darkness hurtling towards her.

“No!” Dr Montgomery goes flying, Azathoth vanishing, her body crashing against the wall. The torch tumbles from her hand, clinking as it falls to the ground.

[“Doctor!”](#) Bad and Fundy are the first to rush over with healing magic, with TapL and Eret accompanying them. The remaining tentacles shrivel and burst into clouds of dust.

Dream strides up to the torch gleaming in the light. It’s over. They’ve done it. This will stop the fusion between Mementos and the real world, and reality will revert back to what it once was.

“We did it.” Navi places a hand on Dream’s shoulder. A pang of pain rips through Dream’s chest. He isn’t sure what he’s expecting. For Navi to just up and disappear? To fade away into nothing but light?

“We did.” Dream hugs him tight, unwilling to let go.

“I’m sorry, Doctor, but this Treasure...we have to take it.” Tubbo’s voice snaps Dream from his trance. Dream releases Navi, skin still tingling from where Navi’s touched him.

“I...” Dr Montgomery laughs forlornly. “To think that my dream was shattered...on the day of its completion.”

“Dr Montgomery, we know why you want to do this,” Tubbo continues. “And I have to thank you too. Without your help, I don’t think I could have ever made it past that stage of grief. I don’t think I could have made it to Enderlands High and met these friends.”

Dr Montgomery drops her gaze.

“I would never have met friends who would care for me so much,” Tubbo says. “So...thank you. Thank you for what you’ve done, Doctor.”

Dr Montgomery opens her mouth to reply, but she doesn’t get the chance to, not when the ground falls away beneath her. It all happens so fast. None of the Thieves has the chance to react as she falls through the air, plummeting towards the ground, eyes open wide in shock.

“No!” The look on Tubbo’s face is crushing. Navi looks up and grabs his wrist, pulling Tubbo away from where a piece of concrete lands from the ceiling, exposing the darkness of the night sky from above.

The Palace is crumbling. Fundy wastes no time in transforming into the Fundybus and the Thieves pile in. Dream gets in last, slamming the door shut.

“Go, go, go!” Sapnap yells.

Eret slams on the accelerator and the Fundybus shoots off, out a hole made in the wall. The Fundybus’ wheels screech against the cables as they follow its path, a long, winding path down to the ground.

“Fucking hell!” Fundy yelps as the Palace continues to collapse, toppling, taking its cables with it.

And that includes the cable that the Thieves are currently sliding along. Dream’s stomach drops as they fall. He braces himself for impact, body tensing, waiting for the inevitable.

Nothing could have prepared Dream for the rush of air out of his lungs and the rattling of his bones as he hits the ground, fall broken with Eret under him.

Fundy changes back immediately, depositing the Thieves on the hard concrete of the rooftop of an apartment block. Fundy himself lays flat on his stomach. Dream still clutches the torch to him as he scrambles off Eret, the latter wincing from what must be a bruise on his cheek.

“You’ve got the Treasure, right?” Bad says, and Dream nods, staring down at it. A torch. She must have truly believed that she *was* a god. A messiah sent from the skies above to save the people from their suffering.

“And now the Metaverse will disappear,” Navi says, glancing up at the twinkling stars.
“Everything will return to normal. You’ll go back to being normal, everyday students.”

“*You’ll*”. Not “*we’ll*”.

Techno seems to have noticed it too, from his frown. Meanwhile, the other Thieves are already celebrating, fantasizing about where their next celebration would be.

“Now, how do we get d-“ Skeppy starts, tensing when the building begins to rumble and shake. Dream nearly topples. What was that?

[Something](#) golden begins to rise from the streets below. Dream watches, enamoured, by this glimmering giant clad in golden armour. It looms over them, size comparable to both Yaldabaoth and Satanael. On its palm stands a figure, robes fluttering behind her in the wind.

She holds out a hand, and the torch is yanked from Dream by an invisible force.

“Doctor?” Tubbo gasps.

Dr Montgomery hops from her spot on the Persona’s palm. Her clothes are torn but her mask is still intact on her face. She raises the torch.

“I have come this far to realizing my dream,” Dr Montgomery says, a sense of desperation in her tone now. “I cannot let you interfere any longer!”

“Doctor! Please!” The building begins to rumble, and Dream almost loses his balance.

“Is that her Persona?” Sappnap squints, throwing an arm up to shield his eyes from the glow.

“Her will must be crazy strong if her Persona can just evolve like that!” Fundy cries.

“Adam Kadmon! Heed my call!” With a flourish of her arm, Dr Montgomery sends a wave of energy at the Thieves, knocking them clean off their feet. Dream picks himself up, summoning Yoshitsune.

Adam Kadmon fires a blast of light from its palm, the white beam cutting through the air and disintegrating everything in its path, ripping the building in two.

Al Azif levitates above them, glowing with green symbols and emitting beeping noises.

“No weaknesses, no resistances,” Navi says. “It’s strong! Be careful!”

Dream unsheathes his dagger. It’s time to end this. It’s time to show Dr Montgomery her faulty ways.

They’re taking that Treasure. Their final Treasure.

That is what Dream promised, after all.

Chapter End Notes

omg forgot to write the last chap but:

Justice arcana rank 8 -> 9 (Tricksters of Justice)

Magician arcana rank 9 -> 10 MAX (George)

The Final Battle

Chapter Summary

the true final battle against adam kadmon and the end of the metaverse

Chapter Notes

we're finally reaching the end! Can't believe we've actually made it this far! 171 chapters in and still counting!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

2/3 - WEDNESDAY – EVENING

Adam Kadmon is a force to be reckoned with. Dream yells as he's thrown back, body flying through the air and slamming into the ground. His chin smarts, his torso covered with bruises. He lifts his head, ignoring the complaints of his muscles, the headache tearing at his skull.

Tubbo and Eret are combining their powers, drawing up a veil of light that protects the team from one blast, giving Navi time to heal the wounds of the injured. The shield of light splinters and shatters, shards dissolving into dust.

Sapnap and Techno send a wave of electricity charged with nuclear power. Dr Montgomery merely stomps her foot, beaming into existence a shockwave that counters theirs, overpowering them and knocking them back into TapL and Fundy.

“It has a weak spot,” Navi says in Al Azif, levitating over Dream’s head. “You see that orb on its chest?”

The orb in question flickers with a captivating azure light. As if beckoning them. Dream nods.

“We have to concentrate all our attacks at that one point,” Navi says. “We have to break it. There’s no other way.”

The building rumbles. Dream whips out his pistol.

“Can you block one attack, Navi?”

Navi pauses. Al Azif whirrs incessantly.

“Yeah.”

Dream nods. “Let’s do it, then.”

“Everyone! Aim your attacks at Adam Kadmon’s core!” Navi’s voice reverberates in their heads. “The blue core on its chest!”

The core gleams tauntingly. It contains all of Adam Kadmon's essence. Destroying it should rid Dr Montgomery of her control over her Persona. This has got to work, and they've only got one chance.

"We have one chance!" Navi shouts. "I'm going to block one attack, and in that time, you're going to have to attack that core!"

Dream doesn't need to look at the others to see their understanding, the fire in their eyes. He merely waves a hand and summons Yoshitsune. He readies his pistol.

Dr Montgomery makes a sweeping gesture and a gust of wind swirls around them. A beam of white descends from the heavens, from the parted clouds. Navi activates his shield, the Final Guard against Dr Montgomery's final attack.

"Fire!"

Nine bullets, charged with the Thieves' respective elements, soar through the air, the colours coalescing into one giant, multicoloured shell. The bullet drills against the core, tails of rainbow trailing behind them.

"No!" Dr Montgomery recoils, head snapping back, a hand on her chest. "No! Adam Kadmon!"

Come on! Shatter it already!

"I will not fall here!" Dr Montgomery screams. Energy begins to gather around Adam Kadmon in the form of shining sparkles, a new layer of gold surrounding it, spreading up to its blue core. "I *cannot* fall here!"

The beam of white fades and Navi drops from Al Azif. His clothes are singed, burn marks on his flesh. He draws his revolver, infusing it with shrouds of black. With no hesitation, he sends the final bullet arrowing at the orb.

And the orb shatters.

Adam Kadmon screeches, the impact forcing it to take a heavy step back. Dr Montgomery grunts, clutching at her middle. She sinks to one knee, her coat pooling around her feet. She still holds the torch in her hand, fingers curled tight around it.

["Doctor..."](#) Tubbo approaches her cautiously.

"Even after...even after this...I still don't have the power to..." Dr Montgomery's shoulders shake, voice cracking. "I can't..."

She glances back up at Adam Kadmon, at its tired face. It holds out a hand. A moment of silence passes between them.

"I see." Dr Montgomery smiles, ducking her head. She swipes the tears from her face. "You share the same sentiments too, don't you, Adam Kadmon?"

Adam Kadmon does not reply. Dr Montgomery chuckles.

"After all, I am you, and you are me."

Dr Montgomery staggers to her feet, and the Thieves tense up. She turns to Adam Kadmon.

"Take me, Adam Kadmon. Take me and we shall become one," Dr Montgomery says with a

carefree laugh. “We shall fulfil our noble dream together. With our combined power, we can promise everyone a future without strife nor sorrow!”

She drops her shoulders, her next words whispered, carried by the wind.

“No matter what happens to me...”

She steps onto Adam Kadmon’s palm, and he lifts her into the sky. She wraps her arms around his head. Dream watches as she slowly melds with him, her entire body absorbed into him.

Adam Kadmon glows orange now, replacing its golden lustre. Adam Kadmon growls, unleashing a whirlwind of energy. Dream’s knees are bent, arms thrown up to defend himself from the sudden draft that blusters by them. Adam Kadmon grows even bigger, even stronger.

“What is...did she fuse with it?” Fundy coughs. With a wave of his paws, he dismisses the wind around them, carving out an alcove within the storm.

“I think so,” TapL says. “Oh my God.”

[Adam](#) Kadmon draws its fist back, a ball of white converging at its knuckles.

“No!” Navi’s voice pierces through their ears as Adam Kadmon rains a blow from above. Al Azif takes the hit, the attack easily breaking its shield and sending Navi sprawling to the ground. Dream yelps in surprise, the force of the attack strong enough to send the Thieves hurtling through the air.

Dream lands with a sharp crack of his ribs. He winces in pain, but gasps when he catches sight of a familiar figure, limbs splayed.

“Navi!” Dream pulls him to his feet, a hand on his shoulder. “Are you alright?”

“Fine.” Navi wheezes. “I’m fine.”

“What *is* that thing?” Sapnap and Eret are attempting to attack it, battering this new and improved version of Adam Kadmon with bolts of electricity and arrows of light, but those attacks seem to bounce off him with no effect whatsoever.

“We can’t lose here,” Navi says. He waves his hand and leaps into Al Azif once more. “Distract it! I’ll try to find a weakness!”

There’s got to be a chink in that armour, an Achilles’ heel. Dream summons Yoshitsune and hurls a spear of energy, a katana of light that merely dissipates as soon as it hits Adam Kadmon’s skin.

No way. None of their attacks are working. They’re not even *fazing* him! Adam Kadmon draws its fist back once more, white light converging at his knuckles. If not even Navi can fully protect them against that devastating attack...

“Skeppy! Eret! Tubbo!”

The three Thieves hop into action, forming the largest dome of ice backed up by layers and layers of curtains of light. Adam Kadmon’s fist comes crashing down one them once more, smashing the reinforced ice dome even more easily than it had crushed Navi’s shield.

Intense pain courses through Dream. It feels as if all his bones has been shattered. His legs and arms scream with exhaustion as he forces himself to stand, knees buckling under him. The other Thieves don’t seem to be doing too well either. Skeppy is being nursed by Bad and Tubbo by

Fundy, the both of them having sustained massive injuries from that one blast.

Navi...please!

"I got it!" Navi calls. "It only has one weak point, and that's its head!"

"Its head?" Techno asks, clutching his arm.

"When it gathers energy from its surroundings to attack, that's when it lowers its defences and that's when we have to strike," Navi says.

Speaking of which, Adam Kadmon is now gearing up for another punch, and Dream isn't sure they can withstand yet another attack. This is their only chance. But how are they...?

The other Thieves stand up, backs straight, as they stare up at the white ball of light. Any fear, any apprehension that they may have harboured is now gone, replaced by determination bleeding from every pore of their being.

"What are you...?" Dream starts. Fundy turns back to him with a smirk, and nods. Dream gets the message and draws his pistol.

When the fist comes down on the Thieves this time, bringing with it the very judgement of Heaven itself, the Thieves are ready.

"What?" Adam Kadmon speaks for the first time, his voice mixed with Dr Montgomery's. "How can that be?"

["We're](#) done with your games!" Eret shouts.

"We're choosing our own destiny!" TapL grunts with the effort.

"We may not like who we are now," Fundy yells.

"But that's why we have friends!" Skeppy squeezes his eyes shut, pushing against the fist with all his might.

"People who will guide us on the right path!" Tubbo grits his teeth.

"We can improve if you'd just give us the chance!" Bad clenches his jaw.

"Dream, you're taking an awfully long time to shoot it through the face!" Techno snarls.

Dream leaps into the air, Al Azif swooping beneath him, swerving and veering through the air, headed straight for Adam Kadmon's head, the cooling breeze in Dream's face as he squats on Al Azif, pistol at the ready.

"Dream." Navi says. "It's time for you to end it."

Dream leaps from Al Azif, grappling hook shooting out, its claw catching onto the back of Adam Kadmon's head. Dream's feet is against its face, and from a tiny, translucent window on its forehead, he can see Dr Montgomery within, cables wrapped around her body, covering her till she's almost gone.

Dream presses the barrel of the pistol against Adam Kadmon's forehead.

"Checkmate."

With a single shot from his pistol, ringing out through the quiet of the night, Adam Kadmon roars, his form disintegrating, scattering amongst the stars. Al Azif swoops by again and Dream hops onto it, the two of them spiralling down to where the Thieves are gathered on the sidewalk, surrounded by rubble.

[Tubbo](#) holds Dr Montgomery's Treasure, fingers tight around its grip.

"Where's the Doctor?" Fundy asks.

Dream bites his lip and lets the silence speak for itself. Tubbo nods, a certain sort of grief in his eyes.

"Let's go," Tubbo whispers. "This time for real."

"I'm not sure if you noticed, but we have to get back to the Palace entrance to get out of here," Techno says.

"And we're..." Bad glances around. They're trapped by rubble on three sides, and a canal lies to their left. "There's nowhere we can go."

[Perhaps](#) damaged from their battle, the stack of rubble beside them begins to crumble, large pieces raining from above.

"Well crap!" Sapnap strikes the concrete with electricity. Its pieces fall harmlessly to the ground. The building which they had fought Dr Montgomery on is now leaning towards them, threatening to collapse all over them.

"Everyone! Get in!"

Fundy has turned back into the Fundybus. Everyone scrambles in, Navi slamming the door shut behind him. The tiny platform on which they stand tremble and quiver with the force of the tremors.

"Do you see a way out of here?" Dream asks.

Eret glances out the window, from left to right. They're surrounded by concrete. Unless they dive straight into the water... Dream's thoughts are interrupted by a strike of concrete against Fundy's body.

"Fundy!" Bad cries. "This isn't a time to show off, you muffinhead!"

"Can you fly, Fundy?" Tubbo asks. His voice jerks as Fundy grunts, another piece of concrete hitting his roof.

"Flying..." Fundy trails off. "I can't..." He sighs deeply. "No. It's not a matter of whether I can or can't. I *have* to fly!"

The building topples, more and more concrete plopping into the water, sending seawater spraying up into the air. Dream shuts his eyes, only the whirring of blades filling his ears.

Wait, the whirring of blades?

When Dream dares to look once more out the window, all he sees is the skyline of Fariold, shining brightly with billboards and advertisements and streetlights. It's beautiful.

And the other thing...

“Fundy! You’re flying!” TapL gasps.

“I wish I had my sketchbook with me.” Skeppy hums.

It takes Dream several seconds to let that sink in. Fundy is flying. Fundy is no longer a minivan, but rather a helicopter soaring through the skies, blades slicing through the air as they leave that scene of destruction behind them.

Eh, they’re in the Metaverse anyway. That place would be as good as new as soon as they return to the real world.

“There’s the Palace entrance. We’re almost home,” Eret says.

All of a sudden, Fundy jerks to a halt. Dream jumps in his seat. What was that?

“Someone’s...grabbed me! We’re losing altitude!” Fundy screams. Dream’s stomach drops. They’re so close! They’ve got the Treasure in their grasp. Why...?

Why does she still fight?

Dream opens Fundy’s door, the rush of cold wind piercing his skin. He sees her, standing behind her Palace, Azathoth blinking in and out of existence behind her. However, its tentacle holds strong, curled around Fundy’s landing skid.

“Dream? Where are you going?” Navi asks, an edge in his tone.

[Dream](#) meets Dr Montgomery’s eyes before turning back to his team.

“You guys go ahead. I’ll catch up.” With that, Dream leaps from the helicopter to the cries and yells of his teammates.

He lands on the slippery platform, ruins and remnants of what must have been part of Dr Montgomery’s Palace. She stands opposite him, her mask and her godly garb dissolving. Azathoth fades away as well, leaving no trace behind.

Dream’s mask leaves him, and it almost feels like he’s lost an important part of himself. What had remained a constant this whole year had been his mask, the mask that granted him the power to be himself, that had allowed him to meet his friends.

“Clay...” Dr Montgomery reaches a hand out to him. “In the end, I still failed.”

“It was a valiant attempt.”

Dr Montgomery smiles sadly. “Was my will not strong enough? Was this plan doomed to fail from the beginning?”

“Your will was *very* strong, Dr Montgomery,” Clay says, his hands in his pockets. “It was probably...probably stronger than any of ours.”

“But why?” Dr Montgomery screams, fingers digging into her scalp. “Why did Patricia have to go through that? Why did she have to...Why was she the one who...” Dr Montgomery lets out the most animalistic, the most desperate scream that Dream has ever heard.

“Why me?” Dr Montgomery sinks to her knees as the ground cracks beneath her.

“*Why me?*” Clay gulps. He’s heard something very similar before. Unfortunate circumstances and

events that she had never asked for, that *no one* would ever ask for. She had lost her best friend. She had lost her research and credibility. She had lost everything before Azathoth had awakened and gave her a way out.

“Doctor!” Clay shouts, diving at her, grabbing her wrist just as she begins to fall, the earth shattering to reveal the long drop to the asphalt below.

Clay grunts. His fingers are slipping, and without the power of the Metaverse, he’s having a little trouble maintaining his grip.

“Clay?” Dr Montgomery looks up at him, her eyes shining with tears. “What are you doing?”

“I’m not going to…” Clay hisses. “I’m not going to let you die!”

“But why?” Dr Montgomery drops her gaze. “Why would you let me live, even with what I did?”

“Because there are still people who care about you! Like me and Tubbo!” Dr Montgomery slips even more, and Clay tightens his grip. Cracks begin to fork like lightning underneath him as well. If this keeps up, they’re both going to fall!

A sudden shout echoes through the air, forcing Clay to turn his head, grunting with the strain of the effort. When he does, he’s immediately blinded by the glare of searchlights and the noisy whirr of chopper blades in his ears.

“Hang on!” Fundy yells.

“We’re almost there!” Tubbo shouts.

Clay smiles as he turns back to Dr Montgomery. Dr Montgomery’s eyes are watery, but within them, Clay can see just the tiny spark of hope.

“It’s time to go back, Doctor. Back to reality.”

*

Chapter End Notes

Justice arcana rank 9 -> 10 MAX (Tricksters of Justice)

Rehabilitation: Complete

Chapter Summary

dream has officially ended his journey as the leader of the phantom thieves

??/? - ??? – EARLY MORNING

Clay wakes up in the Velvet Room this time dressed in his Enderlands outfit. No more prisoner's garb, no more Phantom Thief coat. Just plain, old Clay. The door to his cell is wide open, and Clay is greeted by both Igor and Lavenza.

"You have done well, Trickster," Igor says. "Not only have you bested a twisted god, you have also helped stop a misguided soul."

Clay drops his gaze to the blue floor. Lavenza's shoes come into view, prompting him to lift his head.

"Throughout your journey, you have forged many a bond with the people around you," Lavenza says with a proud smile. "Thus, you now harbour the World arcana within you."

Clay watches as the tarot card representing the World arcana spins in front of him, transforming into a blue sphere and melding with his soul.

"The World arcana is proof of your deep bonds," Lavenza says. "Now, we can gladly announce that you have truly completed your rehabilitation."

"Wait. What happens now? Is George..." Clay's mouth dries. He never did think that that name would grace his mouth so soon after the day of reckoning. "What about my friends...too?"

"Time may not be rewound, but the world will continue as it should have," Lavenza says, hugging her book to her chest. "What should have happened on the day that Tammy Montgomery altered the very fabric of reality...will happen."

"So that means I'm in prison."

"It seems so."

"And George is dead."

Neither Lavenza nor Igor say anything for the longest time. Whether it is out of pity or actual sorrow, Clay doesn't know. All that he knows is that the next time he looks up, both of them are already disappearing, their bodies fading into blue butterflies.

"You were truly a remarkable guest," Igor says, and for the first time, Clay can sense the genuineness behind that grin.

"We are proud to have had you, dear Trickster," Lavenza bows. They vanish for good, leaving the Velvet Room completely empty. Something metallic drops to the ground with a clink. A key. Clay picks it up, turning it around in his hand. It's probably the key to the Velvet Room. Judging from

the large "V" carved into it.

A sudden wave of sleepiness washes over Clay. He heads back to that lumpy mattress and lays down, letting the slumber take him.

He has no reason to be here anymore.

*

2/4 – THURSDAY – EARLY MORNING

Nick groans, body crushed against the hard concrete of the sidewalk. Where the fuck is he?

“Get off me, stupid fox,” Nick mutters, shoving Floris’ tail off his face. He shrugs Zak and Darryl off of him too. The Thieves pick themselves up one by one, rubbing their heads and temples, clearing the fog from their minds.

They wound up right outside Lara Stadium in the wee hours of the morning, with the sun just peeking out from behind those skyscrapers. Nick checks his phone, a sense of loss at the empty spot where the Meta-Nav’s widget used to be.

“Well, I guess everyone made it out okay,” Eret mumbles.

“No, not everyone.” Tubbo glances around, a scrap of newspaper clutched in his fingers. “Where’s Clay and George?”

“Clay and...” Darryl trails off.

“They’re gone?” Harvey furrows his brows.

“When reality reverted, that must mean that whatever should have happened...happened,” Blade says, dipping his head. “If I’m not wrong, Clay would have been brought in as a witness for Singh’s crimes.”

“A witness?” Tubbo asks.

“And that means that he would have to be arrested on the grounds of being a Phantom Thief too,” Blade says.

“Wait, why?” Zak asks.

“Because only the Phantom Thieves are able to credibly ascertain whether Singh had really committed those crimes, because they...we were the ones who stole his heart,” Eret concludes.

“Then George...? He’s not arrested too, is he?” Tubbo asks.

At that, the group goes quiet. How can they forget what happened on that fateful day in that engine room? George surviving by pure dumb luck had been such a ridiculous belief. So ridiculous, but he had once again brought light into Clay’s life. From the way he smiled more when George was around, the way he walked with a skip in his step...

They all wanted to believe in that lie.

“I’ll ask my mom about Clay,” Nick says. “Come on. Let’s go get ready for school.”

School. Nick really doesn’t want to think about it now, if ever. Floris hops into his bag and the ex-

Thieves make their way back to the train station in complete silence.

*

2/4 – THURSDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“That would be a great help. Thank you.” Blade hangs up. He turns to Phil.

“So? Did they find her?”

Blade nods. “Yeah. Thanks, Phil.”

Phil chuckles. “No problem. Helps to have connections in the force.”

When Blade leaves the shop, he finds Eret and Nick standing outside, a strange combination.

“Well?” Nick asks, cocking his head.

“They found her. I need to head down to the precinct for some questioning.”

Their leader may be in juvenile hall right now, but it’s only a matter of time before they bust him out.

Just give them a few more days, Clay.

*

2/5 – FRIDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“Please! A very good friend of mine has been arrested for a crime he didn’t commit!” Yao Yi speaks into the microphone as she addresses the whole school over the PA system. Eret stands by the door, leaning against the doorjamb. Niki stands beside her. “We need as many people as we can to speak up about this. He has suffered an injustice that cannot be overlooked! Please!”

She dips her head so far that she knocks the microphone over, sending it sprawling across the desk. Niki snatches it up and continues. “If we cannot even help one schoolmate, we will have disgraced ourselves as a school!”

*

2/5 – FRIDAY – EVENING

“I told you.” Mrs Armstrong folds her arms. “There was absolutely *nothing* wrong with his conduct.”

“Are you sure about that?” The interrogating officer asks, fingers clasped in front of him. The other officer is busy scribbling down her statements in his notepad.

“Of course!” Mrs Armstrong huffs. “I’m his guardian! I should know best!” She leans forward, almost threateningly. “I know you’re trying to dig up some dirt to pin a crime on him.”

She smirks at the brief flash of fear in that officer’s eyes.

“But I’m not going to let that happen. You hear me?”

*

2/6 – SATURDAY – DAYTIME

“I’m going to announce his name as the key figure in the completion of this medicine at the next conference,” Joel says, typing into his laptop. He looks up at the new chief of the hospital, the man who has replaced Rivers.

“I’m sure this will prove his good character in the trials.” Joel hums, spinning in his chair to face him. “Please. I want to increase his chances of being found innocent as much as possible.”

The man nods. Joel smiles.

“You’ll cooperate, won’t you?”

*

2/6 – SATURDAY – EVENING

“There’s actually an online petition going around,” Gina mumbles. She jolts when the door opens, turning around to find Nick entering the room.

“An online petition?” Floris hops from the top bunk, padding down the stairs and making for the desk where Gina is seated at.

“Yeah,” Gina says, pointing at the screen. “I did a background check on this guy. Turns out he’s a divorced dad, has a teenage daughter and-“

“Is he one of his associates?” Floris asks.

Gina pouts. “Don’t cut me off like that. But yeah, that’s what I meant to say. They’ve been exchanging Discord messages, at least.”

Nick shakes his head. “Dude, you’re crazy.”

“Anyway, I’m signing it,” Gina says. “And I’m signing it for you guys too.”

*

2/7 – SUNDAY – DAYTIME

“You see that guy’s name on the leaderboards? The one at the very top?” Tommy says, hands shoved into his pockets. He turns to the crowd gathered around the Gun About machine.

“He’s actually a good friend of mine. And I heard that he’s gotten arrested for a crime he didn’t commit,” Tommy says. “We need more voices online, in the streets! On online forums, petitions... stuff like that!”

Tommy bows his head. “I never say ‘please’, but just this once, I’d like to ask you all to please lend him your support!”

*

2/7 – SUNDAY – EVENING

“There was this big brother who...who had been very caring, and he had helped so many people... and he carried Velvet’s legacy!” Timothy says, Ant sitting by his feet as he addresses the orphanage caregivers.

“He didn’t have to, but he did, and I really, *really* want to thank him for that, along with many other people in this neighbourhood,” Timothy says. “But we can’t do that if he’s been arrested.”

“But...” One of the caregivers starts, but Timothy bows especially low, and Ant ducks its head, mewling.

“Please! There must be something you can do!”

*

2/8 – MONDAY – AFTER SCHOOL

“If not for this young man, I would not have been able to work alongside you all today,” Ruby says to her group of colleagues. “He has lifted me out of a complicated situation, a situation which could have ruined the lives of me and my family.”

“I’ve heard about this! I saw it on Twitter!”

“Exactly! He’s my friend and someone who’s helped me through my darkest times!” Ruby takes a step forward, fist clenched. “Please! Please help me vouch for him!”

*

2/8 – MONDAY – EVENING

“Well, there has been a certain young man who has been falsely accused of a crime,” Wilbur says, the speakers crackling overhead. He adjusts his spectacles on the bridge of his nose.

“He had been my biggest source of inspiration when writing my new book,” Wilbur continues. “Had it not been for him, I doubt that I would have gotten to where I am now.”

Cameras continue to flash. Journalists are writing down every last word he’s saying.

“He pulled me out of a slump I was in and motivated me to finish my story.” Wilbur smiles. “Now I shall draw attention to his, and I’m hoping that you would be able to protest his wrongful arrest with me. Thank you.”

*

Valentine's Day

Chapter Summary

dream leaves juvenile hall + valentine's day

Chapter Notes

initially wanted to split this into 2 chaps but like i felt it would be dragging the story out

2/13 – SATURDAY – DAYTIME

“I...I wasn’t expecting this.”

Mrs Armstrong sits opposite the pane of glass, a gentle smile on her face.

“I’m sorry that I couldn’t have visited you recently,” Mrs Armstrong says. “I had been busy.”

Clay nods. She’s a prosecutor, after all. At least this is a change to his boring routine of a day. He’s grateful for that much.

“Well, I’m glad to inform you that Singh has been successfully convicted,” Mrs Armstrong says. “And your testimony was the key piece of evidence to put him behind bars.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“That is my first piece of good news,” Mrs Armstrong says, brushing a lock of her hair to the side. “The other piece of good news is that you can leave starting today.”

“Leave? As in, leave juvie?”

“Yes. I’m here to bring you home.”

Home. That’s a place that Clay hadn’t been to in a couple of days. Not since escaping Dr Montgomery’s Palace. The time that had flown by had been empty, going through the same motions over and over and over again.

“Why so suddenly?”

“You have your friends to thank for that,” Mrs Armstrong says, rising. A guard escorts Clay out of the room, where his belongings are returned to him. He follows Mrs Armstrong out of the facility, where a sedan waits for them outside.

“Yo!” Floris cries, shifting over in the back seat when Clay opens the door. Floris, and Gina too, apparently. What a pleasant surprise.

“You’re here too?”

Gina pouts. “You act like you’re disappointed to see me.”

Clay laughs as a warmth bubbles in his chest, thawing the ice that had taken root in his heart. Clay closes the door and Mrs Armstrong starts the engine. The car trundles down the long road headed back into Fariold city.

The frost is beginning to melt under the sun’s hot rays. Very soon, spring will be upon them. Clay has only about...a month left till he has to leave. Leave this beautiful city behind and all his friends.

“So, what are you doing here?” Clay asks. “You haven’t answered me yet.”

“Because I’m officially adopted,” Gina says, puffing her chest out. “I’m Gina Armstrong now.”

“Really?” Clay’s eyes widen. “Welcome to the family, Gina.”

Gina beams.

The rest of the trip home is spent listening to Gina ramble about how she’s recently gotten into this animated series called “Neo Featherman X” and about how she’s planning on going to one of their conventions sometime next month.

“And you’re coming. With everyone else,” Gina says, folding her arms.

The familiar sights of Jule Halls come into view, with their quaint little houses, tiny, beautiful gardens and lively children running about. Mrs Armstrong turns down a corner, passing by the abandoned church and a playground and finally, Clay can see the Armstrongs’ residence.

“Come on. I’m sure you’re dying to have a bath. And some good dinner,” Mrs Armstrong says. Clay leaves the car, watching as Nick emerges from the house with Gina’s wheelchair.

“Glad to have you back,” Nick says, unfolding the wheelchair and helping Mrs Armstrong lift Gina into the seat.

Clay smiles. “Glad to see you too.”

“After you,” Mrs Armstrong says. Clay’s instincts tingle. He smells a plot of sorts. Still, he pushes the door open, only to be greeted by the bang of a party popper – several, actually – and the rain of streamers and confetti as he walks right into the house.

“Surprise!” Harvey screams. Zak lets loose another popper, and Darryl yelps when the strips of confetti gets in his face.

Speaking of which...

“Darryl, your eye...”

“Yeah, I got the surgery done,” Darryl says, grinning. “It’s fine now.”

Clay smiles. Eret welcomes him back with a shake of the hand and Blade offers him a cupcake from the platter on the coffee table. Tubbo grasps his wrist and pulls him over to the dining table. Said table is covered to the edges with food of every kind. From noodles to rice dishes to seafood and meat and salads and pastries...

“Welcome back, Clay.”

“Oh my God.” Tears gather in Clay’s eyes as his eyes sweep over his team, his friends. Nick, Floris, Darryl, Zak, Eret, Gina, Harvey, Blade and Tubbo. They’ve stuck by him all this time, and his early release was thanks to them as well, apparently.

“What did you do to get me out?” Clay asks as Mr Armstrong emerges from the kitchen with another plate of fruits. They greet each other with smiles on their faces.

“We managed to track down that woman that Singh assaulted,” Floris says. “The one who testified against you and put you on probation.”

Clay raises his brows. Nick returns from the kitchen with plates and cutlery, setting the table with what little space they have left.

“Phil had connections with the police, and using my position, I could get her to testify,” Blade says. “Then Molly finished the rest.”

“Yeah,” Darryl says. “Singh didn’t stand a chance with both your testimonies.”

“And we had a support coming from many places too,” Eret says. “Cheng and Niki from school, for instance.”

“Tommy helped out too,” Tubbo says. “And Wilbur.”

All his confidants, it seems, have come through for him as well. He’s very fortunate to have such deep bonds with such good people. As they partake in the celebratory meal tonight, with all the singing and laughing and joking around, Clay feels free.

It’s the freest he’s ever been, without the threat of a deadline looming over their heads, without the pressure of having to shoot a god in the face constricting him as a cage would a bird. Now, he holds his own life in his hands, with his newfound friends and family.

As he glances, eyes darting from person to person, he can’t help but lament the dull ache in his chest, thinking too hard about the ghost of a person who should be here, but never will again.

Clay’s fulfilled his promise. His final promise to the man he loved.

*

2/13 – SATURDAY – EVENING

...

...

...

...

Me: Good night!

...

...

This message could not be sent as the number you are trying to contact no longer exists.

*

2/14 – SUNDAY – DAYTIME

“Disgusting. There’s chocolate everywhere. And heart shapes.”

“You’re only finding it disgusting because you’re, sadly, single,” Gina says as a matter-of-factly. Even so, what Nick says is somewhat true. Most of the stores today seem to be selling some Valentine’s variant of their product. Valentine’s Day perfume, Valentine’s Day red roses, Valentine’s Day Trip-For-Two on a luxury cruise liner...

Hell, they’re walking along *Valentine Hills*, for goodness’ sake.

“There’s nothing wrong with being single,” Nick rebuts.

“Besides, chocolates are good,” Floris says, poking his head out of Clay’s bag. “Look, if you’re not expecting any from anyone, let’s just go buy three each and give each other.”

“That’s expensive,” Clay says.

“And plain sad,” Gina points out.

Floris bristles.

“Here we are.”

Clay looks up. They’re at a florist’s, the store surprisingly empty. Then again, most people would have bought their bouquets before the actual day. The sales lady greets them as they approach.

“Would you like some flowers for your beloved? We still have quite a few types of flowers left!” She smiles, gesturing to the remnants of their wares. Clay orders a bouquet of white lilies, and the woman nods, getting to work. Most people would pass off a bouquet of white lilies as a friendship bouquet, probably, so it wouldn’t look too suspicious.

The lady hands them over, and Clay pays for it. With the bouquet in hand, the foursome head back down to the train station, this time headed for Creek Walk.

*

2/14 – SUNDAY – EVENING

“It’s over there.”

Gina wheels herself over to the spot where a lone tombstone stands. Clay squats in front of it, the bouquet in hand. There is a framed photograph there and dust has already gathered around the flowerpot where the now-wilted bouquet sits, stalks dipped in water.

Clay removes the old bouquet and places the new one in. Several stalks of white lilies. Purity. Rebirth. Perhaps one day, in another city, in another time, in another life, the two of them may find each other again and live a happily ever after together.

“I wish you could have been here. I miss you so fucking much.” Clay stifles a sob, fighting back the sudden tears that have sprung to his eyes. “You didn’t deserve all that. I...”

He buries his face in his hands. He thought he'd gotten rid of those feelings after accepting that reality. He had believed that he had chased those feelings away, that they had become nothing more than a constant, simmering ache.

Now that sorrow has come back full force, slamming into him like a truck. Like a tsunami coasting against the shore. Clay dissolves into a mess of tears, almost barely able to register the hand on his shoulder and the arms around his middle, the furry body against his stomach as he cries his heart out. His breaths come laboured, his chest convulsing as he gasps for air, arms tight around himself.

Will this sting in his heart ever leave him be? Will this pain ever go away? Clay sinks into the embrace of his friends as he whispers his first and final "Happy Valentine's Day" to the man he'd never meet again.

*

Saying Goodbye

Chapter Summary

saying goodbye to all ur social links!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

3/20 – SATURDAY – DAYTIME

“All packed up for tomorrow?” Mr Armstrong asks.

“Yeah.” Clay nods. Floris still rides in his bag, bushy tail swishing.

“You should go and see your friends.” Mr Armstrong nods. “Not that you can’t come back and visit, but...Oh and Nick and Molly are out right now, but they should be back in the evening.”

Clay smiles and makes for the door. He’s texted most of his friends last night, asking if they’d be free to meet up today. Of course, all of them did agree to, and now it’s time to go meet them one last time.

For now.

*

“Hey.”

“Hmm?”

Floris digs through his bag, producing what appears to be a tiny cap meant for a doll. Clay recognizes it instantly – it’s the black cap that Fundy wore.

“It’s a present from me to you,” Floris says. “Thanks for believing in me. Even when I was, um, beingabitch and doubting myself.”

“What was that you said?”

“When I was doubting myself,” Floris says loudly. “Didn’t think we’d really be friends when we first met; I’m gonna be honest.”

Clay laughs as he rounds the corner, finding Niki sitting on a swing at the playground, where they’d agreed to meet.

“Hey!” Her expression is bright, waving to him enthusiastically. “Glad to see you one last time before you left.”

Clay settles down on the swing next to her. It’s strange that the playground is empty today. Usually, there would be neighbourhood kids playing in the sandbox, climbing the jungle gym, that sort of thing.

“How’s your mother doing?” Clay asks.

“Her rehabilitation is coming along nicely,” Niki says. “She’s getting better, and the family therapy is helping a lot too.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“It is! And it’s all thanks to you,” Niki says, smiling. “If not for you...” She shakes her head with a giggle. “I’m sure you have more friends to say goodbye to. Give me a call or a text if you ever come back to visit!”

Clay waves goodbye to Niki as he and Floris head towards the station. It’s quite crowded today. He boards the train that just arrives, grasping the handhold dangling from the ceiling as the train trundles down the tracks.

To Valentine Hills he goes.

*

“Clay!” Darryl waves at him from the sports store as soon as Clay emerges into the underground mall. Clay returns the wave and walks over. It’s then that he notices the book in Darryl’s hand.

“Whoa. What’s that?” Clay asks, gesturing at the book. Darryl glances down at it.

“Oh, this? I’m trying to pick up knife throwing.”

Clay laughs. “Missing the Metaverse much?”

Darryl pouts, stuffing the book into his bag. “Not really. Just thought that it’d be nice to find a hobby that’s more...dangerous.”

“I’m not sure what Zak would feel about that.”

“He’s...probably fine,” Darryl says, shrugging. “We’ve been through worse.”

He regards Clay with a serious expression, and Clay straightens his shoulders.

“I’m sorry that I haven’t been the best friend,” Darryl says, “and you’ve always had to help me out a ton, but I’m really glad that I met you.”

“Same here.”

“Thanks for helping me make Mr Krones pay for his crimes, and for helping me get stronger and sort out my feelings with Zak and Adrian,” Darryl says. “Even though you might be a little bit of a muffinhead at times and you curse a lot...”

Clay smiles.

“But you’ve been a really good friend. I hope you’ll get to come visit soon!”

He and Clay part ways, the latter deciding to head up to the streets where he’s arranged to meet the others.

*

“Wel-oh, it’s you.”

Clay's eyes land on the man behind the counter, a magazine in one hand, open up to the crosswords page, and a pen in the other. Phil swings his legs off the counter and stands.

"Good to see you," Phil says. "You're heading home tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah." Clay nods. "Thanks for all that you've done, Phil. Providing us, minors, weapons and stuff."

"It's no problem. They're not real anyway," Phil says.

Clay hums. "How goes the case against that police commissioner?"

"Who? Tabbs?" Phil laughs heartily. "He's been arrested on charges of first degree murder and is now behind bars." There is a certain sort of sentimentality in his words. "It took a good few years, but I'm sure Tommy's parents can rest in peace now, knowing that his son is doing well."

"Speaking of Tommy, how is he?"

"Tommy's doing fine. He's at the arcade now if you want to go talk to him," Phil says.

"I'll do just that." Clay dips his head and waves goodbye to Phil before ducking out of the store and making for the arcade.

*

Tommy is gathered with his friends at the arcade, playing some sort of basketball game. He notices when Clay arrives, excusing himself to saunter over to him.

"Hey, big man."

"Hey yourself," Clay says.

"I heard you're leaving," Tommy says. "Did I ever tell you that you were the best rival I had?"

"No. I don't think so."

"Well, now you do," Tommy says, scratching his head. "It's really embarrassing, Clay, and I'm hoping you're not going to make me say this out loud."

Clay raises a brow.

"Anyway--"

"What is it?" Clay smirks, watching as Tommy flushes. How uncharacteristic of him.

"I thought I told you that I didn't want to say this out loud, Clay. Now you're a grown man bullying a child."

"I'm only seventeen. Turning eighteen this year," Clay sighs. "Also, you're a child now?"

"Only because I say so, and I'm me." Tommy grins, but the grin fades into a smile. "Thanks, Clay. I mean it. Helping Phil convict that guy and helping me with all that gang bullshit...you're a good man."

Clay nods. "You too, Tommy. You were brave."

Tommy salutes him as Clay turns to leave. "Remember to come back and visit, Big D!"

Clay laughs. Looks like he'll never lose that nickname.

*

"Ruby!"

Ruby spins so fast that she nearly drops the crepes she's holding.

"Clay! How nice to see you!" She pays for the two crepes and rush over to him. "I was a little early so I thought I'd buy us some crepes first."

Clay receives his crepe from her and munches on the chocolate wafer stick. He reaches into his pocket to grab his wallet when she shakes her head.

"It's your last day here, right? Let me treat you," Ruby says. "Jude and I are doing really well now. I've recently been promoted!"

Clay wipes the cream from his cheek. "Congratulations! That's really fast."

"Yeah, you don't say," Ruby says, smiling. "I think I'm doing really well here, honestly. If not for your help, I don't think Jude and I could have gotten out of that predicament on our own."

Clay nods, watching fondly as Ruby bites into her crepe, humming delightedly as she licks her lips. They sit at a bench and chat between bites of crepe, about what's happened recently of note and their plans for the future. When they're done, Ruby announces that she's got to get going, because she's agreed to take her brother out somewhere today.

"I hope you have a great time back at home, and maybe you can come back and we can eat more crepes together," Ruby says, smiling. "Give me a call when you're back in town!"

Clay waves goodbye to her and checks his list of messages. Ah, there appears to be someone at Helen Park...

*

"Yo! Just in time! Pose for me, please!" Zak cries, paintbrush in hand. He's somehow managed to transport his entire easel, canvas and the rest of his painting supplies to Helen Park. He's settled down on a gazebo that looks out to the massive lake filled with boats as per usual.

Clay opens his mouth to reply, when Zak guffaws, shaking his head. "You really think that I'm gonna make you pose on your last day?"

Clay chortles. "Nah." He plods over. "How's your painting coming along?"

"Huh? Great," Zak says, gesturing at his canvas. He's painting the scenery, getting the water down, and a couple of boats, but most of the canvas is still empty. He folds his arms. "You know, I'm really living the life now, huh. Money to buy art materials, the time to sit down and paint in a nice, quiet place like this...oh, and my boyfriend really makes the top of the list."

Clay nods. "Darryl is a nice person."

"Yeah. So nice that he's learning how to throw knives..." Zak mutters. "I swear, if he cuts himself..."

“I’m sure he won’t.”

“How do you know that?” Zak whines. “Oh well, never mind. So, um, the Sylvaria’s still with you, right?”

“Yeah. Do you want it back?”

Zak hums, tilting his head. “Nope. I think I’m gonna carve a path for myself. My mom’s left a legacy behind, and I don’t need her final painting to remind me of it. You can think of it as a memento of our friendship.”

Warmth swells up in him and Clay thanks him.

“No need for thanks,” Zak says, grinning. “I’m just gonna sit here and paint and shit. It’s almost lunchtime. I think you should go and meet other people you haven’t met yet.”

Clay’s stomach rumbles as his phone buzzes. Perfect timing. He reaches for his phone, recognizing the name that has shown up on the screen immediately. “Yeah, I’ve got a lunch appointment, actually.”

*

“I didn’t think you’d know a place as nice as this.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Wilbur huffs. “I’ll have you know that The War of L’manburg had been a grand success.”

“Yeah, I heard,” Clay says, stuffing a piece of steak into his mouth. “Everyone’s pestering you for a sequel, apparently.”

“Yes, and I’ve got the general idea down already,” Wilbur says. “There will be a giant war which will end with the villain’s death. After which, the deranged exiled President will attempt to blow up the country only to be-“

“I’m looking forward to it,” Clay says, and he means it. Wilbur’s books’ plots may be eccentric at times, but he always knows how to bring his message across with his stories. Clay has no doubt that Wilbur will have a successful career ahead of him as long as he continues to persevere and strive for even greater heights.

“Well, I can’t reveal everything,” Wilbur says, shrugging, nibbling on his salad. “I can’t afford to spoil everything for my most loyal reader. I’ll be sure to send you a copy when I’m done. Signed and everything.”

Clay smiles. “That’ll be great, Wilbur.”

They finish their meal talking about everything and nothing at the same time. By the time they have to part, Clay’s already received his next text message. And it appears he’s going to have to travel quite a bit for this...

*

“Eh...the black one.”

“The black one?” Eret holds up the crop top, squinting at it. “I don’t think it’ll go with that other skirt I bought...”

Clay chuckles. “If you’ve already made up your mind, why did you ask? Besides, black goes with everything.”

“Not with those blue buttons, they don’t. I’d look like a walking fashion disaster.”

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” Clay says. Eret returns the crop top to the shelf and heads on over to the counter to pay for his scarlet one. With sparkling golden sequins. Clay honestly doesn’t know *what* kind of look Eret’s going for.

“Has the college responded?” Clay asks as they head outside, bathing in the salty sea breeze of Pointe Boulevard. There are several yachts out on the peaceful seas today. Gulls caw overhead, riding the wind with their wings spread, surreal against the clouds.

“Yeah,” Eret says. “I got in. International relations.”

“That’s amazing.”

Eret practically glows. “Thank you. I hope you spend your last year of high school safe and happy too, Clay. Don’t neglect your studies even when we’re not there to nag at you.”

Clay chuckles. “I won’t.”

He bids Eret goodbye at the train station and he boards the train headed for Beatty.

*

“It’s actually coming along well.” Clay sizes the tiny café up. It fits right in with all the other shops here with its timeless décor and darker shades of colours. As of now, the café is empty, but that should change soon when it opens for real.

“It is! It’s going to open soon. Like, maybe in a month’s time, when we’ve got all the logistics settled and stuff,” Harvey says, then his face falls. “But then you won’t be there for that, huh.”

“I could come down during the weekends,” Clay says, shrugging. “It’s only a couple of hours by train.”

Harvey rubs his chin. “Maybe I should just schedule the big opening on a day when you can come down...I mean, if not for you, I don’t think I would have been able to even *have* this in the first place.” Harvey turns back to his storefront. “So, thank you, Clay, from the bottom of my heart.”

“It’s no problem. You did a lot of it yourself too,” Clay says. “You stood up for yourself and decided to make your father’s dream come through. The right way, this time.”

Harvey nods and extends his hand. Clay shakes it.

“I’ll see you...in about a month’s time, maybe,” Harvey says. “I’ll let you know again when the grand opening is!”

Clay waves goodbye to Harvey just as his phone pings with a new message. His next appointment is just down the road, at a small jazz club tucked away down a populated alley.

*

“I didn’t think they’d be open at this time of the day,” Clay says.

“They open in the afternoons, and it’s almost four,” Blade says, sipping at his soda.

The singer has come in today, delivering a soulful ballad whilst the club-goers listen and chat.

“You getting back to your detective duties?”

“School’s out,” Blade says. “I’ve submitted college applications, but I’m still thinking on it, to be honest.”

“You don’t have to do stuff you don’t want to do, you know,” Clay says. “Especially not if it’s just to fulfil someone else’s expectations of you.”

“Someone else’s expectations...” Blade mumbles, then chuckles. “I’ve come a long way from that.”

“Yeah, you have.”

“And now that Singh’s gone, there’s no reason for me to stay on in the force for now,” Blade says. “I could still work part-time like what I’ve been doing...”

Clay spends the next half an hour listening to Blade talk about his future plans, with a straw in mouth and his head resting on a hand. The time for them to leave comes too soon, and Clay finds himself whisked away back to Jule Halls.

*

When Clay arrives back at the neighbourhood, Joel is already closing up his clinic, metal shutters clanking as they hit the ground.

“Hey,” Joel says with a smile. “I was just about to go wait for you by the station.”

Clay returns it. “I’m here now. Saves you a long walk.”

Joel hums. “You’re leaving tomorrow, right?” He cocks his head. “I’d like to thank you again. Seriously. Lizzie is doing well – she’s in physical rehabilitation right now – and she asked me to say goodbye to you too.”

“I’m glad.”

“Yeah, and business is swell,” Joel says, nodding. “Never did I think that I could end up helping so many people. I only came out here to avoid Rivers, to be honest.” His gaze drops to his shoes, then back up at Clay. “I’ll be closing this clinic up for a while soon, though. Gotta go work on a new project. They said they wanted to improve on the drug I synthesised. Maybe make it into liquid forms to-“

Joel catches himself, laughing. “I shouldn’t bore you with the science stuff. You have a few more friends to see, right? You should get going.”

Clay thanks him and wishes him luck for his future endeavours. He decides to make for the abandoned church sitting just around the corner.

*

A familiar meowing has Clay glancing over to the rustling bushes. Clay kneels as Ant stalks over, fur covered in foliage. He rubs Ant’s head and Ant purrs contentedly.

“Well, I guess it’s time for me to go,” Clay says. “I had a lot of fun fulfilling those wishes and... I’m glad you have a new home now. With people who love you.”

Ant's tail swishes. He tugs on Clay's pant leg, leading him over to the church's main doors.

Under reconstruction, it says. Church services will resume in the second quarter of this year.

"I'll come back and visit sometime," Clay says. "Till then, you're going to protect this church, right?"

Ant mewls and Clay runs his fingers through its fur. Clay waves goodbye to Ant and he makes for home, the darkness of the night blanketing the quiet neighbourhood.

*

"Thank you for helping with dinner preparations," Mrs Armstrong says, scooping up the broth with her ladle and bringing it to her mouth. "Even though it's your last day..."

"I'll still be having breakfast here tomorrow," Clay says, rinsing the cutlery. "Besides, I can come back during the holidays."

"We'll always have a room waiting for you," Mrs Armstrong says with a smile. She turns the fire down, the sizzling of flames devolving into a low crackle. "I don't think I had the chance to truly thank you yet, Clay. If I am being completely honest, I think you were the one who reconnected our family. Especially after Neil's death."

"I mean, I could have helped mediate at some points, but if everyone else didn't put in the effort, I don't think that it could have worked out," Clay says. "Every single member of the family wanted to come back together as, um, as a family again, actually."

"Perhaps." Mrs Armstrong stirs the soup. "Even then, we cannot downplay your contributions." She turns to look at him. *Really* look at him. "Just remember that we'll always be here for you, Clay, even when you've moved back to your hometown. You will always have a place here with us."

Her words are filled with genuine warmth. Clay smiles as he heads back out into the dining room, carrying the bowls of soup and cutlery, where Nick, Gina and Mr Armstrong are already seated.

*

When Clay retires to his room for the night, he's greeted with a buzz of his phone. Picking it up, he recognizes instantly the name that has popped up on his Discord.

Phoenix SC: A little birdie told me you were leaving.

Phoenix SC: Identified themselves as Ali Baba

Phoenix SC: Honestly, I don't know how they knew that I knew you

Phoenix SC: The Internet is a dangerous place

Clay suspects he knows who it can be.

Me: Don't worry. She's a friend.

Phoenix SC: I thought so

Phoenix SC: In any case, I hope you're doing well now. I'd like to thank you again for what you've done for both my daughter and I

Phoenix SC: Perhaps we can remain in contact even after you left

Phoenix SC: and if time permits

Phoenix SC: perhaps play some games together

Me: that would be great

Me: looking forward to it!

Me: Wish you and your daughter a wonderful life ahead of you!

Clay puts his phone down, a small smile on his face. It appears that Phoenix SC is doing well too. The door opens with a creak, and Clay lifts his head.

*

“Hey.”

“Hey yourself.” A lazy grin spreads across Clay’s face. “You’ve got a goodbye speech or something?”

“Took the words right out of my mouth.” Nick says, laughing. “I bet you’ve been receiving goodbye speeches the entire day.”

“Right. I think this is the most eventful day I had, honestly.” Clay yawns. “I literally met up with everyone. Ran from Valentine’s to Helen Park then back to Beatty and...well...everywhere.”

“Exhausting.” Nick says. He moves to lay on his bed. “So, um. Here’s probably your final goodbye speech for the day.”

“Yeah.” Clay rolls onto his back, staring up at the ceiling. He’s meeting Tubbo at the station tomorrow. “Hit me with it.”

“It’s...well...” Nick sighs. “I want to say thanks. About helping my family come back together and...and helping me deal with Neil being gone. It was really hard after he died. Tore everyone apart.”

“It’s no problem.”

“You’re really similar to him, but I know Neil can’t ever be replaced,” Nick says. “But even so, you’re still my brother. Like sworn brothers.”

Clay turns onto his side. “Yeah. That sounds nice.”

“It’s settled. No going back on that now.”

Clay nods against his pillow, even though Nick can’t see it. There’s no need for him to, anyway. They share a bond as strong as their spirits can ever allow.

“Keep in touch,” Nick says, yawning again. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Clay throws his blanket over his shoulders, Floris already snoring beside his head. Tomorrow, he's going to leave this city behind, his friends behind, going back to his life in the countryside. He's going to miss this place.

It's hard to fall asleep when you're suddenly assaulted by a rush of emotions. It's hard to close his eyes and force himself to think about nothing.

But Clay does anyway, finally getting some restful sleep in the wee hours of the morning.

Chapter End Notes

just one more chapter!

Let Us End The Game

Chapter Summary

The End

Chapter Notes

omg i CANNOT believe i forgot to include yao yi in the goodbyes holy shit

ALSO CAN'T BELIEVE I ENDED THIS OFF WITH 200 BOOKMARKS

dream ends his journey with:

Knowledge: Encyclopedic (Level 4: 153 points)

Charm: Charismatic (Level 4: 94 points)

Guts: Dauntless (Level 4: 91 points)

Proficiency: Transcendent (Level 5: 91 points)

Kindness: Empathetic (Level 3: 74 points)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

3/21 - SUNDAY - EARLY MORNING

Yao Yi: Documentary Draft 1.docx

Yao Yi: Sorry i couldn't meet up with you yesterday!

Yao Yi: I hope you have a safe trip home!

Yao Yi: I 've done up a little bit of the script for the documentary of the Phantom Thieves!

Yao Yi: I promise you that I don't want to be famous or anything anymore

Yao Yi: You've shown me that I don't have to be famous to make changes to society.

Yao Yi: So thank you :)

Yao Yi: We'll surely meet again!

Clay sends a reply to her immediately, that he'd check out the script as soon as he can. Just as he stands, he hears the sound of knuckles against the door and Nick's voice calling him to head down to breakfast. He slips his phone back into his pocket. Floris accompanies him as he makes his way down to the dining room, where the entire family has already gathered over plates of eggs benedict.

*

3/21 – SUNDAY – DAYTIME

“You sure you don’t want a ride to the station?” Mrs Armstrong asks.

“I’m good,” Clay says, shaking his head. They’re going to take Gina to the hospital today, to ask about prosthetics, and Clay doesn’t really want to bother them.

“Well, starting today, I’m going to have to keep you out of trouble,” Floris says, sticking his head out of his bag as soon as Clay steps out of the door, luggage in hand.

“Really? Aren’t you the one who’s always getting into trouble?” Clay walks along the road, taking in the sights he’d be seeing for the last time in what will be a long while.

“What do you mean?” Floris whines. “I do *not*.”

The trip to the train station is quiet, since no one really gets up early on Sundays. Birds sing in the trees while clouds drift lazily overhead. The sun’s brilliant rays cast their warmth on the ground. Ah, the magic of mornings. Clay must admit he doesn’t get to experience this much.

Just as Clay is about to step into the station, he hears a shout.

“Hey!”

That’s a familiar voice. Clay whips his head around, looking for the source, the force nearly throwing Floris out.

“Watch it!” Floris huffs.

“Sorry,” Clay mumbles, eyes landing on a baby blue minivan parked at the side of the road, hazard lights flashing, a P-plate displayed on the dashboard. Waving from the window is a face he recognizes instantly. A sight for sore eyes. He waves back, walking over to the van.

“Yo.” Nick says, arms folded, leaning against the side of the van. Eret is seated in the driver’s seat, fingers clasped behind his back.

“Hey!” Harvey calls from the back seat, and it’s then that Clay realizes that the entire gang is here! Darryl and Zak are squashed in the back, while Harvey sits in the middle. Blade rides shotgun.

“What are you...how...?” Clay stares at Eret. “You’ve gotten your license already?”

“Yeah.” Eret laughs. “Why do you sound so surprised?”

Clay tries to forget the times he’s nearly been thrown out of the Fundybus thanks to Eret’s sharp swerves. He shakes his head. “It’s nothing.”

“This van is Phil’s, by the way,” Blade says, “in case you’re wondering.”

“I see.” Clay is about to climb in when Harvey stops him. He and Nick peer out the window on the other side.

“What are you looking at?” Floris asks.

“Well, a criminal record isn’t easy to overturn,” Nick says, sighing. “Look, Singh isn’t the only crooked guy out there. Turns out he’s got a lot of goons working under him who are desperate to keep their position.”

“So they want me back in jail,” Clay says flatly.

“Pretty much,” Darryl says. “They’ve been tailing us for a while now. Didn’t think they’d still be here.”

Clay frowns. Even if he gets to the main station via the subway, he’s still going to get trailed now that those people know that he’s here.

The sound of a vehicle pulling up behind them has Clay spinning on his heels. It’s a taxi. The door to the back seat opens, and Clay’s eyes widen when he realizes just who’s behind the wheel.

“I think I can help.” Montgomery winds her window down, a smile gracing her lips.

*

The ride to the station is silent, save for the rumbling of the engine and the trundling of the vehicles against the asphalt. Clay stares out the window, trying his hardest not to watch Montgomery through the sideview mirror.

It’s strange not seeing her donning her white coat, instead dressed in a comfortable jacket and jeans. He wondered what became of her after the whole alternate reality fiasco but being a taxi driver was the last thing he expected.

They pull up to the train station, bustling with people. The rest of the Thieves had taken the van for a spin, agreeing to meet up with them at the station once they’ve shrugged the authorities off.

“How much is the...” Clay starts, eyes dropping to the meter.

Montgomery shakes her head. “No need for that. Think of it as a small token for what you’ve done for me.”

Clay nods, asking the question that had been on his mind this whole time. “Why a taxi driver?”

“Hmm?” Montgomery glances back at him. “Well, I’ve decided to...do something a little humbler for now.” She leans back against the seat. “If you ever find yourself struggling in life, know that you can start over, like me. I hope that helps you, Clay.”

Clay smiles. “Thank you. I’ll remember it.”

“Then we’re even.” Montgomery reaches over, hand clenched into a fist. Clay reciprocates the fist bump, before alighting and grabbing his luggage from the trunk.

At that moment, a blue van veers down the path towards them. Montgomery starts the engine and takes off, the white of smoke puffing from the exhaust pipe.

Clay turns his head, watching as the van comes to an abrupt halt in front of him. Harvey slides the door open. “Man, those guys just won’t give up!”

“I’m sure you had a fun ride,” Floris says, grinning.

“Anyway, I’m glad you made it here safe,” Nick says. “We’ll see you soon, yeah? Summer holidays or something. We can go on down to the beach.”

“Oh, and you have to be back for Harvey’s café opening,” Darryl says.

Clay nods. “I will.”

“Bring Floris too!” Zak shouts.

“Of course he’s going to bring me!” Floris cries. “The Phantom Thieves won’t be complete without me!”

The crowd in the van bursts into laughter. Eret furrows his brows as he glances in the sideview mirror.

“They’re quick,” Blade mutters. He turns back to Clay. “Sorry. I don’t think you want them finding you.”

Clay shakes his head. “No worries. I’ll text you guys when I’m on the train.”

“Good luck!”

“Bye!”

“See you soon!”

Clay watches as the van splutters, tyres screeching on the road as they rush away, spraying up a cloud of dust behind them. Clay adjusts the bag on his shoulder and the luggage in hand, and heads for the station.

*

“Clay!”

“Tubbo!”

Tubbo is waiting for him by the gantry, a can of Coke in one hand and his phone in the other. He greets Clay with an awkward hug.

“I haven’t told you about it yet, what with everything that’s happened and, well…” Tubbo shrugs. “Anyway, I don’t want to bring the mood down, so I’ll just say that I got second place in the competition!”

“Really? That’s great!”

“Yeah!” Tubbo’s eyes are sparkling, body trembling in excitement. “I hadn’t expected that, I’ll be honest with you.”

“Well, I knew you could have done it, Tubbo,” Clay says, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

“It really feels like I’ve done Thomas proud,” Tubbo says. “Like his spirit was there, congratulating me.”

“Looks like you did yourself proud too.”

“I did!” Tubbo positively glows. “Oh, and I’ve got something for you too! I wanted to catch you to give it to you before you leave.” He reaches for something in his bag, pulling out a piece of thick and glossy paper.

“It’s, um, it’s the certificate I received from my last competition, when I was still Thomas,” Tubbo says. “I got third place then…it’s not my best result, but I don’t particularly…I mean, I’m no longer Tubbo, and keeping that…”

“Just doesn’t feel right,” Clay says, accepting the certificate from him. This is Tubbo’s way of

throwing that old life away. It is a reminder of a time that he did not live truthfully to himself, a time of lies. His world is now clear, and he can face this reality not as Thomas but as whom he really is.

"Oh, and there's this too!" Tubbo rummages through his bag, digging out a crumpled strip of newspaper clipping. Woman in hospital after parents were brutally murdered.

"Is this...?"

"Dr Montgomery's Treasure," Tubbo says. "This was the reason why she did what she did."

"It's where her twisted desires began," Floris agrees. Clay attempts to smooth out the crinkles and places it into his bag as carefully as possible.

Tubbo throws his bag over his shoulder and downs the last of his Coke. "I'm sorry for keeping you so long. I'll see you two soon!"

He rushes off, probably having somewhere else to be. Clay glances over at Floris, who nods. He heads off towards the ticket station to purchase his tickets.

*

"Ah, this is the life!" Floris settles against the seat. Staying in the bag, of course, but he can probably still feel the plushiness behind it.

"You can afford to be attached," Clay says, moulding his body against the backrest. "The ride's about two to three hours."

"That's long. I think I'm going to sleep."

"You should."

Clay leans against the window of the train and tries to catch up on some Zs. God knows he needs them.

*

"Are we there yet?"

Clay groans, waking up from his restful nap with a paw against his arm. Clay whips his head around, managing to catch the station name on a sign mounted on the wall. He grunts, voice heavy with sleep.

"No. The next one."

"Huh. Back to sleep then."

Clay turns back to the window for a mere second, eyes widening when he notices a mask with a smiley face staring back at him, his body clad in its green coat.

He rubs his eyes as the train begins to leave. No way. The Metaverse is gone. There *is* no more masks. No more Personas.

That was probably just a trick of the light.

Clay leans back against the window, cheek pressed up against the glass.

If he had bothered to keep his eyes peeled for just a couple more seconds...

He would probably have seen a young man in a suit and a briefcase flanked by two officers. A man who, for an instant, wore a blue shirt and jeans, white goggles wrapped around his head.

The train continues to chug, lulling Clay back into slumber. The shuttling of wheels against the tracks is a calming soundtrack to signal the end of his adventure as the leader of the Phantom Thieves. Of course, the end only signifies a new beginning. Even without his Metaverse powers, he's still himself. He's still the same old Clay.

He can find new adventures to go on. The future may hold struggles, setbacks and hardships, but with the right mindset, the right company...

The world is his oyster.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for reading this through till the very end! I swear I didn't actually expect this to be as big as it is but, well, IT IS! \o/ Hope you've enjoyed reading this! It's been a wild ride, to say the least.

Lol i actually wrote a longer thank you note in the next chap so pls head on to that if ur interested!

The next few chapters are my Author's Notes which I pretty much include at the end of every big fic. This is the first time it's more than 1 page! Will mainly consist of my thoughts writing the the story so hop on there if you'd like!

Stats at final chapter release:

Kudos: 1143

Bookmarks: 200

Comments: 2480

Hits: 47302

P.S. The traitor coming back to life (although whether it was him was kinda ambiguous) was part of the true ending to P5R i didn't pull it out of my ass to give u guys hope lmao

Fics you might like if you liked this one:

[Reach Out to the Truth \(Chaptered\)](#)

[The Spirit of Family \(Chaptered\)](#)

[Elevator Conversations \(One-Shot\)](#)

If you want updates regarding my next works, you can check out my Twitter @huhufrostwrites!

Author's Note 1: Thank You + Main Plot

Chapter Summary

author's note 1!

Mainly discussing my thoughts on writing the main plot.

Chapter Notes

links to 2, 3, 4 and 5 in the chap somewhere

[Thank](#) you so much for following me through this long, long journey. I started this fic all the way back in August last year, and it's been almost six months since! Never did think it would amount to anything much honestly. It really started out as a random little idea I had. When people expressed interest in it, I decided to give this fic a try and it evolved into a 45-minute writing exercise every day. Then as it grew, it became what it is today. Hope you've enjoyed it!

This note: I elaborate on my thoughts on the main plot and stuff like that

2nd note: Thoughts into writing the Phantom Thieves

3rd note: Thoughts into writing the side characters (S. Link characters)

4th note: Thoughts on fight scenes, Palace run scenes, etc.

5th note: Miscellaneous (e.g. OST links)

Author's note (Part I: Main Plot)

The main plot was, I'd say, the easiest to write, because, well, all the story events have already been beautifully written out for me, so I just needed to incorporate the characters into the scenes. If I were to pick out the hard parts to write...it would be the incorporation of the characters themselves and dropping clues about the Black Mask.

Incorporating the characters is harddd because while they've been each assigned a counterpart to the Persona 5 characters, they won't exactly act the same way. Take Tubbo for instance. No way in hell is he gonna act like how Kasumi/Sumire does to Joker lmao. Skeppy and Yusuke are quite different, and let's not even talk about BadBoyHalo and Ann. So that's why I can only make them sound like their MC selves in casual conversation because during serious ones, I need even people who seem non-serious to speak out and move the plot along.

Some of the scenes I liked to write was those where the plot moves along at a fast pace (e.g. A School Assembly To Remember, A Catastrophic Celebration, etc). First, there's a lot of emotionally-driven scenes in those, and second, it makes me feel like I've hit a milestone. Sure, S Links/Confidants are fun to write and all, but they get boring after a while.

As for the S Link/Confidant people, theirs is a little easier because they're not entirely involved in the main plot. I'll elaborate on the Confidants in the 3rd note.

The second hard part is to throw in hints about the Black Mask. Weaving in clues here and there is not easy without planning, so clues about the Black Mask has already been decided around like in fic May. Of course I pulled the same sh*t that Persona 5 did. George responded to Fundy. That would have been my only clue, but I decided to throw in a few more pieces of hard evidences, and a lot of easter eggs. Easier to mix with red herrings anyway.

Many, *many* hints were dropped for George being the Black Mask I think. I've included it in the chapter notes for 11/20, but I'll put it down here again. You could suspect that something's wrong back in 5/30 when George responded to Fundy calling him colourblind. That dialogue was untagged for a reason -> it would have been too obvious if I wrote "Floris says" over there. However, if you consider the people at the scene and the way the dialogues were written, the only person who could have been spoken that line was Fundy.

Another piece of evidence would be how Gina found the Thieves out in the first place. She heard sounds from their Palace runs since Kris' (Kaneshiro) Palace. Yet, she never leaves her room except for when George comes calling. The only person she could have bugged would be George, which would make him even more suspicious, because George wasn't with the Phantom Thieves yet. There would have been no reason for him to be in the Metaverse, or with the Thieves for that matter. That is, unless he's the Black Mask stalking them.

Finally, George made a slipup when he called Dream by his codename during their very first battle together. He should NOT have known what Dream's codename was before the next infiltration because Dream never told him until he officially joined the Thieves. The only way he could have known was, well...

Other hints include:

- The fact that his "Shadow" is Anubis, which C.N.B. has provided a super good analysis on in Chapter 72!
- An easter egg for Persona 4 players, you would realize that George never accepted his "Shadow".
- In Gina's Palace, in the final chamber during Infiltration Finale, the boy on one of her memory images is supposed to represent George, and he wears a suit and carries a briefcase. While George may have mentioned work once in a while, I've never actually said anything about what it really is...
- George never went to Hawaii. Partly to take care of Gina, and partly because of his job.
- The single word "Bang", easily missable, I think, represented the one scene where Shadow Lee was shot and died. Dream could only hear it because George was accidentally using Necronomicon's power to broadcast what he was saying to the group. Why did he need to use Necronomicon's power for long-distance communication? He wasn't with them, of course but he needed to make it sound like he is (I pulled a TeruTeru here, Danganronpa fans). He was hiding, getting ready to off Shadow Lee – moreover, George's voice was "scratchy" when they were escaping; it was mentioned earlier during the fight that his voice got "staticky" when he was far away from Dream. George landed a fair distance from the group when they exited the Palace. No, he was not thrown out of the Fundybus because he wasn't there in the first place. He used a Goho-M to get out, and where did he get this Goho-M? Dream gave him his coat to keep warm in one of the safe rooms of that Palace, and coincidentally, that coat is where Dream keeps his Goho-Ms...
- An easter egg for Persona 5 (Royal) fans, George's Confidant was the only one out of all the party members at that point in time at Rank 8 by 11/20, in accordance with the traitor's...

I had this fear whenever I posted any chapter that probably many writers have – that if you write anything with abuse, anything remotely *bad*, people think that those are your views as well when in

fact, they're not. Such as Krones' sexual and physical abuse, Adrian attempting suicide, Samson's manipulative behaviour. I have this constant fear that I would get bashed because people mistakenly believe that I support these which I wholeheartedly do NOT. In fact, I get very uncomfortable writing about sexual abuse despite not being a victim or personally knowing anyone else who is a victim, because in those scenes, I feel vulnerable. Really, like those types of people could just leap out of the page and grab at me. When those arcs are resolved, believe me when I say I was relieved as f*ck.

So yeah! All in all, it's been a really fun journey with you guys, silent readers or not, people who wrote comments, bookmarked, gave kudos! Seriously during chapters that were hard to write I re-read your comments to get the motivation to do it :)

If I ever, ever have the motivation to do so, I could write a Persona 4 Golden AU starring TommyInnit as protagonist (this would be a challenge considering Persona protagonists are generally *SILENT* and a blank slate and Tommy is anything but. But with how Persona generally deals with the power of friendship I think Tommy would fit quite well here). ...Could make this into a kind of duology lol. Very likely going to work on a Devil Survivor 2 fic starring Tommy, Tubbo and Ranboo too.

Once again, thank you all so so so much for reading and see you next time (if there is a next time hahaha)! Read on to the next few notes if ur interested in my experiences developing the Thieves (Author's Note 2), writing non-Thief Social Links (Author's Note 3) or writing Battle/Palace scenes (Author's Note 4)! There's also miscellaneous stuff (Author's Note 5).

Author's Note 2: Thoughts on Thieves

Chapter Summary

thoughts on developing the thieves! not as comprehensive as people might think lol

[Author's Note \(Part 2: The Thieves\)](#)

If you're here then you're probably wondering what went into developing the Thieves as characters or like some behind the scenes planning stuff lol. I'll be elaborating on their Social Links here too so if you want the non-party members Social Links, please head on over to the next note!

The Thieves all have an in-game counterpart, as most of you can probably tell by the order of their appearance, so I'll be writing in that order:

Dream -> Joker

Honestly it's not that hard to imagine Dream as the protagonist of this story. Other than the fact that the P5 protagonist is kinda silent, they've both got similar personalities, I think, given P5's dialogue options. He's got a backstory that I only touched on at several points in the fic. He is not well-liked by his family, that he has hardly any friends back in his hometown, and this serves as the driving force for that choice I had given you guys: to accept Montgomery's offer of a happy reality where he can remain in the city with his friends forever.

Social Stats were hard I *swear*. Having to come up with absolutely new activities, remembering to add points, having to learn the mechanics behind the Social Stat points system, taking into consideration certain modifiers...well, in the end dream didn't even get like max stats lmao but hey no ones perfect.

Now, DNF alert (until Fundy) if people don't wanna read:

I know I dragged DNF for a long long long time, but with George being the Black Mask, I couldn't just hurry their r/s along. With that said, I had ample room for a sh*t-ton of angst, and I have to say that the fluffiest DNF scene I think is the school festival on 10/26 where Dream somehow confessed to George out of panic lol

Then that scene on 11/20, that scene at Singh's Palace on 12/14, that scene on 2/2 and that scene on 2/14...just broke my heart in two and fixed it and broke it and the cycle repeats itself...The initial plan on 2/14 was to have dream visit the places where he went to with george during his S. Links to reminiscence and end off with the graveyard scene but again I felt like I was dragging the story out a bit too much so I cut it ~~definitely nothing to do with the fact that school restarted when i was writing this and was too stressed with shit to write it nope not that at all~~

Fundy -> Morgana

Fundy is kinda fun to write. To be honest, I didn't know who Fundy was when I started writing this fic I just knew him because my brother watched him and let me see some of his videos. That's probably why Fundy got more into character in the later parts of the fic 'cause I started watching

the Dream SMP stuff and so I got more into Fundy's antics lmao

I needed Fundy to retain some of Morgana's traits for the Andre Lee (Okumura) arc that's why he's kind of an amalgamation of Fundy's online persona and Morgana. His Confidant is based off Morgana's, though the ranking up is a little different (lol totally not because I forgot to rank him up at some points in time...)

When I first came up with the George arc, the 4th arc, gina was not a thing yet. Fundy was supposed to learn coding from tubbo and he'd be the guy who sits behind tubbo's computer and with his tiny fox paws fill the city with singh's calling card lol

Then I decided that it'll be weird since by that point, tubbo would know about the thieves so why can't he do that himself

Then I decided to just throw in gina fundy was knocked down to navigator role with eret during singh's palace

So...yeah. That is how Fundy as a character in this fic came to be.

Confidant Item: Cap

Sapnap -> Ryuji

Sapnap takes on the role of our reckless melee fighter without a mouth filter and Dream's best bud (practically sworn brothers by this point). His Persona is Captain Kidd followed by Seiten Taisei then William. Attacks with a cudgel, just like Seiten Taisei and a cool-*ss shotgun.

Admittedly, when I was thinking up Sapnap's story, Sapnap was intended to take on Kasumi/Sumire's role, with his father taking on Maruki's. Sapnap losing his brother and his mother losing her son as well as his own pain would have spurred Mr Armstrong to delve deep into cognitive science in order to save his own son and wife from their pain. However, there was no way I could have fit Mr Armstrong into the school as a counsellor...or at least, that's what I thought. Thinking back on it, actually I could have done it, but that's only after I had already introduced Dr Montgomery into the mix, and so Sapnap took Ryuji's place and took on the Chariot arcana.

That is exactly why in the beginning, Sapnap's Confidant events are very similar to Kasumi's, in which he lost a brother to a car accident. However, I decided to mix his with Mrs Armstrong's, in which case led to the rebuilding of the Armstrong family which I think turned out well?

Confidant Item: Locket

BadBoyHalo -> Ann

BBH takes on Ann's role. Persona is Carmen which then evolves into Hecate and later Celestine. He uses whips as a primary melee weapon, though he prefers launching fireballs instead, and he uses a submachine gun as his firearm.

BBH takes on the arcana Lovers, and instead of focusing on the strength of heart through his hobby/job as Ann's Confidant did, I wanted to focus on his friendships with Adrian (OC) and Skeppy, and how he's trying to choose one over the other, only to realize that it's possible to have good relationships with both people.

I think BBH as a character comes off as one of the smarter of the Thieves, and his battle

capabilities are nothing to scoff at. He has a Showtime with Skeppy (not explicitly stated) -> their fire-and-ice balls attack thing that they came up with....uh...in one of the Mementos chapters I think it's the Shadow Blossomfield one.

Confidant Item: Muffin keychain

Skeppy -> Yusuke

Ah yes, our not-so-starving artist. While he is not as poor as Yusuke was, since he's living with BBH, they still share the same passion for art (at least in this fic lol). His Persona is Goemon which then evolves into Kamu-Susanoo and Gorokichi later on. He is adept at using katanas and chooses to use assault rifles as his firearm.

Skeppy takes on the Star arcana, different from Yusuke's Emperor. Despite the setbacks that he encounters during his Confidant events, he still seeks ways to improve himself, to strive to make his art better. His Confidant is also based on Yusuke's.

Ngl I had no idea who Skeppy was other than that he was a friend of BBH when I started writing this. I only started watching Skeppy when the fic hit around the end of April, which was when Skeppy was supposed to be introduced, to at least try to write him into character. I could amplify his fun-loving side and make him somewhat eccentric, but also down-to-earth if he has to be.

Confidant item: Sylvaria

Alert: Skephalo until Eret

I'm gonna be real with you guys. I did not start shipping Skephalo until around mid-November. Skeppy wasn't intended to be a love interest at the start, but rather BBH's good friend which drives BBH's Confidant.

Well, I kinda got into it after watching a few clips from Skeppy's streams...then there's Vurb so...

It's hard to write their relationship into the fic, I gotta say. Most of the events are told from Dream's POV so during Palace runs, when everyone is so focused on fighting it's difficult to write in even a few Skephalo moments. During daily life, I don't think BBH likes PDA/skinship all that much tbh so it's hard to write out Skephalo moments when Dream is around as well.

Eret -> Makoto

Our Student Council President who just wants to be accepted; his wish was granted because of the whole James Kris incident. This one is interesting. Because of the arcana swap, Eret took on Robin Hood, while Technoblade got Johanna. Robin Hood evolved into Prometheus, which then evolved into Hereward. Eret uses knuckles in battle, getting up close and personal with the Shadows, while firing from a distance with his revolver.

Okay Eret will take up a big part in this author's note. I will admit that in the beginning, Eret was going to be the traitor. Yep, that's why in the original plan he got Robin Hood, reveal Loki later and get Hereward at the end, just like the traitor in the game. The traitor's identity was a last-minute change when the in-fic month was May. But I decided to pull a trick that I didn't think would work but would have a more profound impact on people who have played/watched Persona 5: I decided to have him respond to the pancakes comment.

Because of a fluke accident, Eret was sucked into the Metaverse with the other Thieves during Krones' Palace. He did explain how he came to know of the Metaverse back when he confronted

Dream about it, but it could have been dismissed as a lie for readers who were impacted by his response to the pancakes comment. Eret was telling the truth, and having been in the Metaverse before, it is completely logical for him to have heard Fundy at that point in time and then respond to it.

So yeah. I tried to hype up the Social Studies Field Trip in the chapter notes and the comments section and laid my trap there...

Eret's Social Link is inspired by that of Hidetoshi's Social Link from Persona 3, a member of the Student Council who also represented the Emperor arcana. Both have trouble relating to the students of the school, and both actively try to change the way they do things which, to be honest, I think will require a lot of strength of the heart.

Confidant Item: Project Plan

George -> Futaba

Our lovable navigator who is also the traitor. George commands Necronomicon throughout most of the fic after actually awakening it during the fight with this cognitive being or his "Shadow". However, he hides his darker intentions, Loki, within his heart, unveiled during the fight in Singh's Palace. Eventually, Necronomicon and Loki fuse to form Al Azif. George is in charge of scanning enemies, detailing their weakness and strengths as well as what moves they're going to use. He also helps to moderately heal the team's wounds and replenish energy on top of giving them buffs.

George is one half of Futaba – the Palace half. He takes on her role as the navigator. George having access to so many skills, so much power from the very start is intentional – he's used to having this power, after all, having spent more time in the Metaverse than any of the other Thieves besides maybe Fundy. George as the Black Mask stems from his love for his sister, to protect her at all costs. Noticing this weakness, his biological father, Singh, attempts to control him like a puppet by threatening her life, forcing George to do his bidding. Even at the very end of his life, when he fights the Thieves, all he wanted to do was to protect his sister.

George's Social Link wasn't inspired by anything. I just made him and Clay do random activities and treated them as dates lmao even though they weren't officially dating at that point I tried to build trust between them? Then use that to my advantage right before that battle in Singh's cruise ship to write this feelings scene lmao

Confidant Item: None

Gina -> Futaba

Gina is the real-world half of Futaba. An OC, she basically just embodies Futaba in this fic, but she is George's motivation to do what he did as the Black Mask. She doesn't enter the Metaverse, but man are her hacking and programming skills sick!

Gina suffered a tragic past. Her and George's biological father, Singh, left them when they were quite young. With the stress of raising three children while juggling her jobs sent their mother spiralling into insanity, setting her house on fire and attempting to kill her children along with her. The final sibling, Garrett, slept in the same room as their mother, while George and Gina shared a room. That is how George managed to escape with Gina by jumping out the window, despite the latter having sustained a broken leg due to osteogenesis imperfecta that requires her to be on a wheelchair for a couple of years.

After opening up to the Phantom Thieves, Gina became happier and livelier. She was taken in by

the Armstrong family at the very end, and she learns to walk with prosthetics a year or two later.

TapL -> Haru

Excited, grenade-launcher- and axe-wielding heir to the Lee Foods company, TapL takes on the Strength arcana, displaying a formidable strength of the soul. The shape of his rebellious spirit forms Milady who evolves into Astarte and finally Lucy.

TapL's Social Link had originally been about him getting bullied for being the rich kid to the point where he laments the fact that he was born into a rich household since despite what everyone says, it seems that only conformity is the answer. He finally learns to stand up for himself and that being different isn't all too bad. This was the original plan anyway.

Then I decided to change it to one where TapL wants to do streaming and videos, or something which his father violently opposes and thus the Confidant would start halfway through Lee's Palace. Eventually, he does start posting videos and stuff and makes a name for himself that Clay even hears of back in his hometown. The thing is, I scrapped this one too.

I came back to Haru's original Confidant and just decided to go with that, because I would need to show TapL doing that whole not trusting people thing plus the fact that he doesn't know what to do with the money and the company he has inherited. I think one needs a heart of steel to be able to take on that much pressure, and that's probably what makes that storyline perfect for the Strength arcana as well.

Confidant Item: Draft Menu

Technoblade -> Akechi

Our favourite Detective Prince the Second, Technoblade takes Akechi's role as the, well, detective who is openly against the Phantom Thieves. He's smart, cunning and able to play Dream's rival really well, just like their online personas. Taking on the Priestess arcana, Techno manifests Johanna after his awakening, who then evolves into Anat and finally Agnes. Techno prefers to use light sabres as a melee weapon and ray guns as a ranged one.

When I wrote the very first chapter, since I cast Techno into Akechi's role, he was supposed to be the traitor, lol. But that would have been way too obvious if I were to turn it into an entire fic (which I did). Instead, I made him a genuine Akechi, if you will. Akechi if he had been truly good and didn't have his tragic backstory. Techno was initially welcomed by the public since he's the mysterious Detective Prince that everyone wants to know about. However, as the story continues and the Phantom Thieves gain popularity, Techno loses support, then started receiving threats on his life.

Suspicion surrounds Techno likely because he's cast into Akechi's role, simply because Akechi is the traitor in the original game. Even regarding Techno's Confidant, where he also does random things with Dream that corresponds to Akechi's Confidant, further cementing that he is indeed supposed to take Akechi's place and that would make him more suspicious.

Confidant Item: Glove

Tubbo -> Sumire

Tubbo takes on Sumire's role as well as her arcana, Faith. His Persona is Cendrillon, which evolves into Vanadis and eventually Ella. His melee weapon of choice is the rapier and prefers rifles.

Lol I didn't know who Tubbo was before I started writing this. I only knew that he was Tommy's best friend. Then Dream SMP happened so...yeah.

Between Tommy and Tubbo, I figured Tubbo would suit Sumire more (I MEAN...if you think about it). So yes, after scrapping Nick's Sumire storyline I transferred it to Tubbo.

I had fun writing Tubbo but sometimes I find it a little difficult especially when he writes or when he texts. Since Tubbo is dyslexic, I tried to make it more realistic where he gets certain words wrong. I'm not dyslexic, but I had dyslexic friends before (one of whom studies Chinese okay. And she does better than me lmao) so I tried to portray it as realistically as I can manage.

Confidant Item: Certificate

*

So these are the thoughts that had gone into writing the Phantom Thieves. Naturally, the ones that took the most planning were the two more suspicious Thieves and the one who was actually the Black Mask, since I need to trick you guys into believing that Eret/Techno is the Black Mask while George works his magic behind the scenes.

One quote that I really, really like that probably describes this situation is this one:

"We call it 'misdirection'. While we keep you busy believing one thing, we're busy making something else happen. What we say is there really isn't, and what we say isn't there actually is." - Trucy Wright, Apollo Justice: Ace Attorney

The next note deals with the other Confidants/Social Links and the process that went into making them, inspiration and stuff like that.

Author's Note 3: Social Links

Chapter Summary

Thoughts on developing Social Links (yes, Joel, Niki, Wilbur, etc.)

[Author's note \(Part 3: Social Links/Confidants\)](#)

Well, here's the content page haha can just use the search function (or Ctrl+F on PC) to search up the three-letter code beside their names to skip to the one you want to read about!

AntFrost (ANF)
Igor (IGR)
Justine and Caroline (J&C)
Montgomery, Tammy (MTG)
Mrs Armstrong (MAS)
Nihachu/Niki (NHC)
Phantom Thieves (PHT)
Philza (PZA)
Phoenix SC (PSC)
Ruby (RBY)
SmallishBeans/Joel (SLB)
TommyInnit (TMY)
Tricksters of Justice (TOJ)
Wilbur Soot (WBS)
Yao Yi (CYY)

*

AntFrost (ANF): Devil

Recap: AntFrost is a cat who seemed to constantly bring misfortune wherever it goes, despite its good intentions, and was shunned by most. With Dream's help, AntFrost manages to fulfil Velvet's last wish, to complete those final few requests put up on the bulletin' board. Eventually, after saving Timothy, a child at the orphanage that Velvet volunteered at, AntFrost was welcomed into Timothy's home. It found a place to call home at last, where people accepted it for who it is.

The inspiration for AntFrost was based on the Fox's Social Link in Persona 4, which revolved around completing sidequests for the residents of the town in order to inspire them to donate to the offertory box at the shrine to repair it. I did something similar here, whereby people wrote their wishes and stuck them to a board in the church, which had been shifted to a forgotten room when the church was abandoned.

Dream helped AntFrost complete the requests, which were, obvious for Persona 4 players, actual random sidequests from the game itself, such as the fishing of the Sea Guardian (P4G only) and finding a woman's dog (though the dog didn't die in P4).

The misfortune part was also inspired by Pokemon's Absol, in which Absol is a Pokemon that is

often misunderstood to cause disaster when it actually only appears *if* a disaster is about to happen, rather than causing it.

AntFrost was a last-minute switch from Jschlatt, who was supposed to represent the Devil arcana and had a story similar to that of President Tanaka's from Persona 3. However, I think I saw somewhere that Jschlatt didn't like being written in fanfics, so I hurriedly scrapped his story before he was introduced and conjured up AntFrost's Confidant instead.

So yeah, this is how AntFrost's Confidant came about.

Confidant Item: Collar

Igor (IGR): Judgement

Recap: "Igor" oversaw Dream's journey from when he started out as the clueless, naïve leader of the Phantom Thieves to someone mature who commanded his legion of Thieves against himself, the God of Control. Disguised as Igor, Yaldabaoth, the God of Control, had attempted to test humanity by pitting Dream against Igor's choice of Trickster, who was George. However, once Dream had failed his expectations, Igor turned on him instead and attempted to regain control over humanity's thoughts.

There isn't much to say about "Igor" other than the fact that I swapped his arcana for Judgement, which had belonged to Sae in the original game. I thought "Igor" would fit since he's sort of "judging" Dream as he goes about his "rehabilitation".

Well, there was actually a major slipup whereby I forgot to advance "Igor"'s Confidant several times, so he was at a lower level than I expected him to be...so I rushed his Confidant at the end, if you couldn't tell lol

Other than that, there's not much to say about Igor because his Confidant is the same as that in the game.

Confidant Item: None

Justine and Caroline (J&C): Aeon

Recap: The product of splitting Lavenza into two, Justine and Caroline are twin wardens who are in charge of fusing Personas for Dream to gain stronger ones. They had their memories stolen by Yaldabaoth when he posed as Igor, their Master, and were assigned to helping Dream with his rehabilitation. Ignorant of the ways of the human world, their Confidant brings them on a tour around Fariold, with Dream as the tour guide, of course.

I handpicked ten events from Justine and Caroline's outings from Royal. Because fusing Personas that they want to advance their Confidant is boring in a piece of writing.

Writing their dynamic with Dream and with each other is super fun. With Justine being the more reserved one, her vocabulary and her diction is vastly different from that of Caroline's. Caroline talks more with her actions and she's more brash, loving to brandish that baton of hers around.

All in all, not too different from their outings in Royal, apart from the fact that they don't gift Skill Cards to Dream.

Confidant Item: Velvet Room Key

Tammy Montgomery (MTG): Councillor

Recap: Montgomery is a counsellor who started working at Enderlands straight after the Krones incident, in order to help students who suffered at his hands. She is passionate in her research, welcoming Dream's help in order to finish writing her paper on cognitive science. Later, she attempts to grant everyone's happy reality by forcing them to give up control over their own fates, which Dream and the others put a stop to.

Also, Tammy Montgomery = Takuto Maruki

Not gonna lie, I watched a whole video about Maruki's Confidant in order to write hers. Most of the dialogue came from the game itself. Patricia was modelled after Rumi, though she is Montgomery's best friend rather than girlfriend.

I think Montgomery is a pretty tragic character – she's modelled after Maruki after all. She is an antagonist who is a protagonist in her own eyes. I must admit I failed to give her much of a character at the start, being someone who just spits profound facts about cognition and stuff haha so I tried to describe her more with actions than just words in the later part of the story.

Her role was initially filled by Sappap's father, Mr Armstrong, who wanted to help his son and wife with the loss of their brother/son, while fuelled by his own sorrow as well. I didn't think it could work at that time, so I introduced Montgomery instead. Well, I figured it could have worked...after I already wrote a few chapters after A School Assembly To Remember.

Again, Confidant not too different from the game so I won't elaborate more.

Confidant Item: None

Mrs Armstrong (MAS): Empress

Recap: After the loss of one of her sons, overcome with grief, Mrs Armstrong refuses to admit that he has passed and instead clings to the thought of Neil being alive. This causes her to neglect Sappap, her other surviving son, as well as causing her to divorce her husband, as she felt that he didn't care enough about the family after Neil's death. Eventually, she learned to let go, and to reconcile with her ex-husband.

Mrs Armstrong is Nijima Sae's counterpart. Both are prosecutors striving for success in a male-dominated field, so there's the pressure of being perfect enough and needing to succeed, which is what brought on her Palace formation in the first place, and it is what made her so easily manipulated by her higher-ups.

I thought up of her Confidant entirely on my own and it's built up in conjunction with Sappap's. Halfway through her Confidant I wasn't certain that she'd invite Sappap's dad back into the house lol but I wrote that she did anyway. Yeah, I wanted to flesh her out, seeing as Dream is living under her roof for the entirety of his stay in the city, instead of levelling up like how Sae did. Also didn't give her the Judgement arcana for that reason.

To be very very honest Mrs Armstrong's Confidant is one of the hardest to write, the others being AntFrost's and Phoenix SC's. As you can probably tell, I'm not one for family drama, so anything involving such domestic family drama is way out of my comfort zone. Still, I tried. Hope it was alright!

Confidant Item: None

Nihachu/Niki (NHC): Hanged Man

Recap: Niki was originally fought over by her abusive boyfriend and mother and the gardening club is her only escape. After changing the heart of her abusive boyfriend and mother, she finally lives her life for herself, free of the expectations from the both of them.

Our dear Niki. I had no idea who she was when I first started writing this lmao. I was desperate for female characters, so I added her in even though I knew jack sh*t about Niki. That's why when a reader commented saying: "She would totally join the gardening club" that's when I knew I had to figure out who she is and what she'd probably do. Again, that's why Niki probably started getting into character in the later stages of her Confidant.

Niki's plot was inspired by Maiko's Confidant from Persona 3, although instead of choosing between her mother and father, she's choosing between her boyfriend and mother. Or rather, they're fighting for her. Although the original plan was to let Niki stand up to the both of them on her own, I had absolutely no idea how to write that in while including Mementos targeting and stuff and the Confidant just took an unexpected turn lol

Niki's Confidant is quite action-packed so it's fun to write. So many things take place at once and it's just pure chaos at times. Had to look up plenty of plant and flower names and how it's taken care of. I definitely don't have a green thumb – literally everything I touch dies.

Confidant Item: Gardening Almanac

Phantom Thieves (PTS): Fool

Recap: Phantom Thieves grow closer with each successful heist. Consists of our leader, Dream, and his teammates Fundy, Sappan, Bad, Skeppy, Eret, George, Gina, TapL, Technoblade and Tubbo. The Confidant eventually evolves into the Tricksters of Justice.

Nothing to say really, but the Phantom Thieves wasn't originally a social link in the game. I just wanted to follow Persona 3 and 4 tradition where the organization the protagonist is part of represents the Fool arcana, where they then evolve into an upgraded version of their organization and take on the Judgement arcana.

Confidant Item: None

Philza (PZA): Hierophant

Recap: Philza is Tommy's godfather and is very concerned about him, like about his lack of friends at his school. Still, Phil struggles with letting go of the past, where his friends, Tommy's biological parents, died while raiding a gang's hideout. When attempting to delve deeper into the case, he is stopped by the Chief of Police, who threatens Tommy's life if Phil refuses to back down. Phil vows to avenge Tommy's parents deaths while also taking care of Tommy as well as he can in the future.

Oh this was fun to write. Also, Smajor/Dangthatsalongname made a small cameo in this as well as Phil's partner back when he was on the force. I based Phil's Confidant off that of Dojima Ryotaro's from Persona 4, while also retaining traits such as dealing with gangs from Iwai Munechisa's Confidant from Persona 5. So it's like a mashup of Hierophant and Hanged Man, I guess.

Philza's interaction with Dream, Tommy, Wilbur and Techno is one of the most fun things to write about this Confidant, since he's pretty much their dad by this point, hence the Hierophant arcana. And I think Philza sitting at a counter, a huge display of all guns imaginable (despite being models) behind him is cool af.

Confidant Item: Detective Badge

Phoenix SC (PSC): Hermit

Recap: Phoenix SC is a gamer on Mimecraft that Dream had met online, who had trouble talking to his daughter after he and his wife had divorced. Eventually, she opens up to him and reveals that his ex-wife and her current boyfriend had been abusing her. Dream takes care of their Shadows and Phoenix SC manages to obtain full custody of his daughter.

I have to say that Phoenix SC's Confidant is one of the hardest to write, alongside Mrs Armstrong's and AntFrost's. Idk it's just...hard. The idea for his Confidant is based off "Maya"'s from Persona 3, but he has family issues instead of work issues. The storyline is also inspired by Futaba's Confidant – that part with Kanna.

Because I'm not one for family issues, this was really hard for me. Sometimes, I didn't even know what to do for his Confidant events because his story's kinda short. I literally had to think back to other Confidant events to try to remember what they said and how they advanced the subplot of the Confidant and just try to write something along those lines.

When I reached like rank 9 I was like "YES" and all that's left is to write the final event after the trial that the Phantom Thieves attended Imao

Confidant Item: Discord ID

Ruby (RBY): Sun

Recap: Ruby was an employee at Triple Seven, the convenience store that Dream worked at in the early parts of the year. F1NN5TER's sister, she works hard to support both of them. However, as their landlord attempts to steal more money from them by increasing the rent to exorbitant amounts, Dream steps in to change his heart. With the money returned, Ruby and F1NN are now living a happier life, with a job that pays even better and a more comfortable lifestyle.

Ruby was, admittedly, inspired by Shibuya from the Triple Seven job in Persona 5 (the employee is actually called Shibuya lol). I thought up Ruby's Confidant myself, but I threw it a bit of Ayane's (Persona 4) personality into it as well as a bit of Yumi's story (also, Persona 4). The middle parts of her Confidant was hard since I didn't know which direction her story was gonna go, but by the end, I had a clear idea of what to write and finished it up quite early in the year. She was one of the early-game Confidants, the others being Sapnap and SmallishBeans/Joel.

Confidant Item: Nametag

SmallishBeans/Joel (SLB): Temperance

Recap: SmallishBeans is a doctor of a shady clinic near where Dream lives, developing a drug in order to cure his wife of a currently-incurable disease. However, convinced that he was stealing her patients, his ex-colleague threatened to shut down his practice. SmallishBeans persisted and his clinic grew from a shady hole-in-the-wall clinic to one that flourishes, with patients visiting him day in day out. Before long, his ex-colleague returns, lying that his wife was dead and that he was too late. Dream changes her heart to find that SmallishBeans' wife is still alive, but just moved to a smaller hospital.

SmallishBeans' Confidant is based entirely on Takemi's from Persona 5. Literally parallel. Except I changed up his arcana because of my original plan for his Confidant. SmallishBeans' story was supposed to retain some of Takemi's, but also some of Kawakami's, in the sense that in pursuing a

cure for the medicine, he overworks himself. There was supposed to be a scene similar to that of Kawakami's, where he awakens in the hospital and Rivers drops the bomb on him.

His Confidant was fun to write, especially during that breakdown scene when he was told that Lizzie died. I would like to think that my forte is angst, so...

Confidant Item: Hospital ID

TommyInnit (TMY): Death

Recap: Tommy was a teen who worked at Phil's shop, before he conned Dream into taking his place for a couple of days. To retain some semblance of his life as an assassin, he plays gun-related games, which led Dream to seeking him out to train him in his gun skills. All his life, Tommy has been surrounded by death, but by helping him realize that that needn't be so, after Thunder1408's supposed death by changing Punz's heart. After that, Tommy decides to look towards the bright side of life and to leave his past behind, surrounded by friends who would support him.

Tommy's Confidant had a lot of people dying, compared to the other Confidants. I mean, he's supposed to embody death after all. Tubbo was supposed to play a more prominent role in Tommy's Confidant, where his life was threatened after Thunder1408's "death" and that is what broke Tommy but tbh at that point it was getting too sad I couldn't bring myself to do it.

I have to say that Tommy is the most fun character to write in this entire fic I'm not joking. His unique speech patterns and mannerisms make it easier to write him into character. I may consider writing him as the main protagonist if I ever were to write another MCYT fic.

Confidant Item: Vlog gun

Tricksters of Justice (TOJ): Justice

Recap: Tricksters of Justice is what the Phantom Thieves have become after they decided to steal the Treasure that lies in the depths of Mementos.

Much like how Persona 3's S.E.E.S. became the Nyx Annihilation Squad and the Investigation Team became the Seekers of Truth, the Phantom Thieves have likewise upgraded to the Tricksters of Justice. This Confidant didn't exist in the game so I just made it up haha

I could have gone with Thieves of Justice now that I think about it but I don't want to use "Thieves" twice lol

Wilbur Soot (WBS): Tower

Recap: An author who fell from grace after his plagiarism incident, Wilbur is tasked with writing a new book with a deadline that is constantly being pushed forward. Unable to handle the pressure meant to motivate him, Wilbur almost repeats the same mistake he made, but Dream stops the man behind it (I'm sorry Ponk) and helps Wilbur get back on track once more, to finish writing the War of L'manburg by his own hand.

Wilbur's Confidant was the second most enjoyable to write after Tommy's. The initial plan for his Confidant was very, *very* different from that of what it has become. Originally, Wilbur was supposed to be a street musician instead of an orator, so basically he takes Yoshida's role from Persona 5, but with the Tower arcana instead of Sun. But honestly I'm not sure where to take the story from there that would fit the description of the Tower arcana so I scrapped it.

The scene I liked to write the most when doing this Confidant is that scene where Wilbur gets

drunk lol. But, like, I have never gotten drunk nor been around anyone who's drunk so all I could reference was whatever I watched/read online haha

Confidant Item: Unfinished Symphony

Cheng Yao Yi (CYY): Moon

Recap: Yao Yi is the image manager of the Phantom Thieves who take care of admin requests posted on the Phan-Site. She is also the one who moderates the forums and polls on the website. Being bullied for being a nobody for most of her life, Yao Yi sets out to prove herself after realizing that her classmate is the leader of the Phantom Thieves. However, this twisted desire eventually births a Shadow within her which Dream manages to subdue without fighting. She saves her past bully from a gang and recognizes her own strength, that she didn't need to be as famous as the Phantom Thieves to be strong.

Yao Yi is based entirely on Mishima in Persona 5, even sharing his arcana. I wanted to make her a little whinier than she is in the fic, but I didn't lol and made her a tad more enthusiastic instead.

My favourite line in her whole Confidant is not even her own, but when Dream tells her that she "sounds like a target". Idk what you guys think but I quite liked that line.

Confidant Item: Documentary Notes

Author's Note 4: Palace Runs & Battle Scenes

Chapter Summary

Thoughts on writing Palace Runs and Battle Scenes!

[Author's Note \(Part 4: Battle/Palace runs\)](#)

So I'd like to start off by saying that several of the antagonists' names share the same first letters as their game counterparts:

- Isabelle Marion = Ichiryusai Madarame
- James Kris = Junya Kaneshiro
- Masayoshi Shido = Markus Singh
- Takuto Maruki = Tammy Montgomery

And this includes several Mementos targets too.

I forgot to do this for Kamoshida lol and it's just coincidence that their surnames started with K. Couldn't do it for Gina and Lee (for obvious reasons).

Battle

Okay I'm gonna put it out there first that battle is fast-paced and that's what makes it fun. However, it's hard the more battles you write, because you gotta start coming up with new techniques, new gimmicks and whole new *battles* or else everything is going to end up the same.

One thing I always tell myself is: use the environment. It's tricky, but at least it won't make everything look like cut-and-paste. E.g. a chase scene in Krones' Palace is going to be quite different than one in Gina's Palace. Krones' Palace would likely involve them being chased by guards, invoking the whole medieval castle theme, while Gina's Palace would likely involve traps.

Of course, what I like to do is to create near-impossible situations to escape from. E.g. that scene in Kris' Palace where Dream and Eret were trapped in a certain room after triggering the alarm. They still did not manage to obtain the piggy bank they needed yet the Shadows are already swarming them. I create a situation and figure out a way to get out of there by making use of whatever's on the scene/whatever they have on them (e.g. the grappling hook, Ender Pearls, etc). If I need a vent for them to wriggle through, I show either one of them noticing the vent when they first enter the room or something.

Another thing that I usually do to describe battles is to put myself in the character's shoes (gonna use dream as an example here since this fic is 3rd person limited from dream's POV). I always think about what they'd focus on. If they're readying to take on an attack, they would be more focused on the enemy charging up for the attack so describe that and less of other things. If they just got hit, then describe the pain and the reaction to the pain. It's always action -> reaction 1 (protag) -> reaction 1 (enemy) to reaction 1 (protag) -> reaction 2 (protag) to reaction 1 (enemy) and so on, so forth. Either way each side is going to react to what the other does. If dream stumbles and falls you bet that the enemy is going to take advantage of that.

Battle with Mementos targets is very hard comparatively since I cannot use the environment to my advantage. Anyone who's seen Mementos target fights will know that the battle takes place in pretty-much featureless rooms that look all the same. So instead, I would have to make use of the Shadows' skillsets to make it more interesting. E.g. Shadows that can use certain spells, fights that involve more than one Shadow, etc.

I think one of the reasons why my fight scenes are better than the others is also because of my exposure. Since young, I've been exposed to shows like anime, cartoons where fighting is involved, video games, etc. Sometimes animations have really good fight scenes. Take the Legend of Korra for example. The way the characters move and the way the fight plays out is good inspiration. Kung Fu Panda is another one, and even older anime like Naruto and Bleach, video games like Uncharted and Final Fantasy can serve as reference too. More often than not, like writing in general, it takes exposure and interest in the subject to get better at it.

Finally, Boss Battles are the easiest to write. No joke. All their gimmicks and everything are basically copied off the original game's Royal version and I do focus on those gimmicks as much as I can possibly manage. Although I prefer the vanilla version's Boss Battles, they wouldn't make for interesting fic fights lol.

However, if I kept focusing on *just* the gimmicks of the Boss Battle itself, it would be pretty boring. What really makes the Boss Battle stand out in writing is the slew of emotions, I think. Since every Palace's ruler is linked to the newest member in some way, it makes it much easier to bring out the emotions of the fight. My favourite Boss Battles to write are Shadow Gina and George's (lmao the siblings).

In more detail:

Shadow Krones (Kamoshida):

This was my first experience really writing a Boss Battle and let me tell you this it was... interesting. I hadn't expected it to get so lengthy, but I was trying my best to fit in all of Shadow Kamoshida's gimmicks like drinking from his cup and summoning Cognitive Mishima (Yao Yi's counterpart) and Shiho (Adrian's counterpart). The thing is it got really long and BBH got knocked out halfway. Then again, having so many parts of the fight to throw into the mix gives me a lot of opportunity for thinking up different battle strategies that they could potentially use to defeat Shadow Krones.

Shadow Marion (Madarame):

Lol possibly the shortest Boss Battle, I tried to focus more on the emotions this time, with Skeppy being enraged at her causing his mother's death and for plagiarizing the Sylvaria (Sayuri). I hadn't even realized it was so short until I read it again when I was searching for something from earlier chapters. Not much to say on this one, except that I hated Shadow Madarame's doppelgangers part

Shadow Kris (Kaneshiro):

This one was relatively more fun since Eret's skillset gives me a lot more to work with, and man I loved the Piggytron. Big, powerful and most importantly, shiny as f*ck. Seriously had fun writing the Piggytron's attacks like the charging-up-and-spinning thing and how it just barrels from one end of the room to the other. To be honest, writing the bodyguards part was a little difficult since I wasn't sure how I was going to introduce them, or how they'd retreat smoothly from battle, since the game just said "XXX fled" or something like that. But it's hard to do that in the fic. Kinda. And don't get me started on the money raining from the ceiling attack

Shadow Gina (Cognitive Wakaba):

Easily the most epic that I wrote at that point in time. Wanted to give the Sphinx a more Junji Ito body horror kinda feel so I basically attempted to whip up an Eldritch Abomination with a two-headed winged sphinx crying tears of black sludge. Symbolizes Gina's guilt and desire to die and everything and how she essentially becomes a little like her mother. Main point of this fight was to show the siblings' connection, to show George's love for his sister, as well as showcase how much Dream cares for George. I really concentrated on writing out the emotional part for this one, since I had to twist the original to the point where it's probably unrecognizable haha. Gina does not stumble into her Palace like Futaba did and Navi is George, so there was no way I was gonna have anyone summon ballistae to shoot down the Sphinx.

Shadow Lee (Okumura):

Arguably one of the easiest to write also. I really, *really* wanted to bring out that frustration that I had having to beat all the robots at once plus the destructive power when they explode. Moreover, I wanted to throw some grenades and axe swings into the fight since TapL's our newest member. And then there's the devastating Big Bang Order...haiz...

Shadow Armstrong (Sae):

Ohhh this was exciting. Because I was more excited about what came after lol

Punishment for attacking Shadow Armstrong was based off the Chinese torture technique: death by a thousand cuts. Or something like that. Basically a person was tied up to a pole and had one cut made on their flesh every single day until they died and even after their death.

Had a hard time describing her roulette fight because honestly I was so tempted to write the Persona 5 vanilla version of this gimmick because honestly speaking I like that one more but that would be super dry so I decided to write in the P5R version.

I heard that this fight scene was super intense? Well to be very honest it was kinda a drag to write ahahaha but it was the next part that kept me going lol

George (the Akechi fight):

Well...this one was emotion-laden. I had a lot of fun writing this because I can just keep going like "how do I make this even sadder". At the end, I knew George was supposed to die, but during the battle I was like "every word brings me closer and closer to his death" and Im not sure what to feel about that :/. Maybe u guys suffered with me and that's what im all about :33

Shadow Singh (Shido):

Oh this was tough. I cut out like his first lion form and that pyramid form because honestly the pyramid form doesn't contribute to much and I think between the first and second lion form the second one is cooler. I wanted to trap both dream and techno instead of doing the 1v1 because someone needs to be there to bring dream to his senses. And this is partly techno's story arc too. Kinda felt bad about not making techno a bigger part of this fight since singh IS his dad in this fic.

The George part was completely unplanned idk what came over me but that happened and im kinda glad it did since it made it feel more like a penultimate final boss

It was quite difficult to write about dream's own emotions while trying to make the battle fast-paced. Because the idea was to get singh to taunt dream with georges death to make him mad and to mock techno for his not being accepted and stuff and incompetency compared to George but

honestly I don't see techno getting mad about that he'd probably be like "eh"

Yaldabaath:

Lol the Yaldabaath fight could have gone either one of two ways: either I retell the boss fight or I recreate it...well, I chose to focus on the gimmick of the fight, which was his seven sins thing. Then revealed that hes basically unbeatable lol and was just toying with them the whole time

The first part of yaldy fight took longer to write than the second half because by the second half the rhythm of the fight and the general idea was pretty much established – yaldy continuously raining down arrows of light and deadly sins and each thief falling victim one by one or two at a time. but of course the sins go away after a while so the incapacitated members could continue fighting later.

It begins to wind down when Yaldy cast the rays of control and this was the hardest part to write. I mean, specifically, the description of the rays of control. Most of yaldy's dialogue in this part was taken from the original persona 5 royal so yeah

Montgomery (Maruki):

Felt more anticlimactic than it should :(I cut out so many parts from the fight like Maruki banning actions and the individual-target tentacle attack and stuff. At least for the 1st phase. I kept to the in-game fight in the 2nd-3rd phase though.

I just let myself loose in this fight because this is the final fight of the series and I just wanted to insert all those feels. As much as possible, at least. Adam Kadmon's attacks are kinda hard to translate into words. Anyone who's watched that fight knows that Adam Kadmon has attacks that should literally level mountains and erupt dormant volcanoes, so it was tragically difficult to actually write them in such a way that it, well, *didn't*.

I originally wanted to include the fistfight between Montgomery and Dream, but im not sure if readers will be comfortable reading a "man punch woman" sequence. And it would have dragged the fight out quite a bit more lol which I felt was kinda unnecessary in this case.

Palace Runs

I'm gonna go individually Palace by Palace:

Castle of Lust:

This one took the longest in terms of both of the game and the fic since it's supposed to be an introduction to the Metaverse and the premise upon which the story is built upon. Plus meeting the initial cast which is the muffintears minus George.

To be frank since this is my first time actually writing the infiltration of this palace I seriously scr*wed up the pacing and stuff and they went through the palace too early, giving me a lot a lot of social link chapters all clumped together

I mainly skipped most of the rooms of the castle and went straight to the rooms which actually moved the plot along or contained important stuff. I get uncomfortable writing about sexual stuff so I think I skimmed over most of the castle's decorations and cognitive beings and stuff so...

Yeah. This was by far the hardest palace to write because it's my first one. If im not wrong the original palace was meant to be longer complete with a torture chamber and everything...

Museum of Vanity:

Gonna be real with you I don't really remember much about this palace. I just knew that I would get a definite break in the middle since it's a palace where the thieves would need to find a way around that mid-palace obstacle.

I relied on the actual lines from the game a lot for this palace, especially the part with the paintings. Because I cannot write anything that can even come close to replicating the raw implications of those lines.

Though I felt a little weird trying to fit skeppy into yusuke's role. I mean they're both eccentric in their own way, but not quite the same. I'm definitely not over Yusuke's "I will pour my heart and soul into creating the best nude painting ever" SO I THREW IT IN. Though skeppy and bad's dynamic is kinda fun to write in this one.

Bank of Gluttony:

The first part of the Palace is the same as the game's, just that I cut out a lot of parts because it's hard to write them into the fic and make it entertaining. Just a lot of dodging the cameras and sh*t

The more interesting part comes when I make them hunt for the piggy banks with the notes. Let's face it the whole palace is friggin camera dodging simulator. Scr*w the blue cameras I swear I wanna pull my hair out every time I get to that part to the point where I just go "f*ck it" and just run right through it. The palace security level can go to hell

Ok in all seriousness the part of the palace that I liked to write the most was the part where dream and eret were trapped together trying to steal that piggy bank with so many shadows coming from around them. It was that instant that I was like "oh sh*t" because I didn't actually have a plan to get them out of there lmao but then I decided to just imagine what a normal action game would probably let me do in that moment and just recreated the scene I guess.

Most of Shadow Kris' lines past that point in that chapter is taken from the actual game.

Pyramid of Wrath:

This was very, *very* hard to write. The puzzles are fine from a gameplay perspective, but how the heck was I supposed to make the Anubis statue orb puzzle interesting in writing?

So my solution was to focus on the story aspect of this palace, to show just what gina has lost and to give some insight into the tragedy that George has experienced as well. To make up for the lack of actual palace puzzle stuff haha

Threw out a lot of George-is-the-traitor clues in this palace too! best place to do so since he's awakened his second persona here and he joins the PT here!

Really the most exciting part of this palace to write was shadow gina's fight :)

Spaceport of Greed:

This one was just following the script lmao. The hardest part to write was just the part where they're jumping from one dome to another, because this part in the game was infuriating and boring. A close second is the one where they have to find the Chief Director and steal his card lol

One part I regret about this is that I didn't include as much of TapL than I initially planned. Then again, in retrospect, I don't know how I could have done that...

Casino of Envy:

This one was fun since I finally get to write techno helping with the infiltration :) and johanna :)

I really really liked to write that part where techno explains the big brain play. Um well I took that entire explanation from the game ahahaha I seriously didn't understand the plan itself until I watched it to explain it to you guys hahaha

I quite liked writing the maze of darkness since I have to challenge myself to make use of the other senses, mainly hearing and touch, to navigate the maze. Also because navi cant use his map and they're really rendered helpless

Oh oh and the "1v1" fights too. I desperately wanted to put prison labour in there somewhere and boom this was perfect. Moreover just wanted to highlight the synergy between George and dream so I can make the next palace hurt more

Ark of Pride:

Lmao it's supposed to be the cruiser of pride but I forgot and just put 'ark' because the song is called "Ark" lol

This is a little boring, I'd think, because honestly the getting the letter of recommendations from random strangers on the ship is not exactly great content lol but I gotta stay true to the story and so it happened

Well, the most exciting part about this palace is definitely the vs George fight. Mainly because people who have never played p5 would probably not have anticipated that and people who *have* played p5 would know what's coming and anticipate the feels.

The George fight is really where I have to stuff all the emotions into because, well, George is gonna die. Hes gonna die saving dream and by right this is where dream is supposed to get some subtle character development. Not sure if you noticed but after george's death dream becomes a lot more subdued – he does speak, but not as much as he did in the past and generally lets the others talk. Okay maybe I didn't do it that well but I tried

Qliphoth World:

Nothing much to say about this one, just that I stole the idea of them holding off the other angels while letting dream and fundy through to the final one from Persona 4 Animation lol.

I actually did want to include Abbadon as a potential miniboss, and maybe Throne and Dominion as potential enemies they were escaping from but alas I wouldn't have been able to fit them in without making them seem super extra

Also I had to use the song "The Almighty" somewhere hahahah because honestly I think it fits more than Rivers in the Desert.

Laboratory of Sorrow:

Largely follows the same as in the game. Except this one was much harder because I'm not quite sure how to describe this Palace besides "white" and "white" and more "white" and maybe "sterile". In the game, atmosphere is effective because of all the wall decorations and stuff and the whole place just felt really surreal.

Also, it may be just me but this felt like the longest Palace in the whole fic, even though in the

game i think Shido/Singh's Palace is actually the longest lol.

Random battle here is hard because well, I have like 10 people fighting at once. And they're all competent. I'm going to need a room full of Shadows to even pose a challenge to them.

Kinda sad that Tubbo doesn't have much screentime, much like TapL :(I just tried to make it more Tubbo-focused on other aspects of the Palace apart from the fighting parts I guess? Well, most of her Palace became exposition anyway, what with all the random videos scattered about.

*

Welp, that's it for this note! Next is the miscellaneous chap which includes: Differences between the P5 Locations and Fic Locations, OST links, the Cryptogram and the cipher and some really really random bloopers.

Author's Note 5: Miscellaneous

Chapter Summary

just some random things lol

[Author's Note \(Part 5: Miscellaneous\)](#)

I just realized a couple of mistakes that I've made which I could not fix because by the time I realized it, I was already at like chapter 50 and stuff:

1: Sunday church. I'm not Christian and neither is my immediate family so I completely forgot about the existence of Sunday church and just made Dream and co. run about and stuff on Sundays lol

2: Tipping. Where I come from it's not common to tip. I've maybe only tipped once or twice in my entire life and I wasn't even in my country. Uh...well...I totally forgot about this too and tipping is like non-existent lmao

*

Locations:

So each location is entirely based off one in Persona 5! Here's the list:

<u>Fic place</u>	=	<u>Persona 5 place</u>
Jule Halls	=	Yongen-Jaya
Valentine Hills	=	Shibuya
Enderlands	=	Aoyama-Itchome
Bowarrow Street	=	Shinjuku
Elytra	=	Akihabara
Beatty	=	Kichijoji
Creek Walk	=	Kanda
Oakoak	=	Ginza
Valleyberth	=	Ichigaya
Lancer Lane	=	Ueno
Helen Park	=	Inokashira Park
Lara Stadium	=	Odaiba
Pointe Boulevard	=	Harajuku
Reedveld	=	Shinagawa
Vance Tower	=	Asakusa
Mauve Beach	=	Miura Beach

The only places not mentioned in the list from the original game:

- Seaside Park is because I don't see a reason for the characters to go there
- Suidobashi because they can just easily go to Destinyland lol
- Jinbocho is actually mentioned but I didn't name it. Just a university book town kinda place. Introduced in Chapter 82: Pay for Me, B*tch.

- Ogikubo, where you can invite confidants to eat ramen. Hmm again I didn't see a reason for them to come here.
- Akasaka Mitsuke. The place where the TV station is. Unnamed in this fic.
- Nagatacho, where the Diet Building, or the Parliament Building, is located. Unnamed in this fic.
- Roppongi, where Okumura Foods, or Lee Foods, is located. Unnamed in this fic.
- Maihama, where Destinyland is located. Unnamed in this fic.
- Tsukishima, where you can bring people to eat monjayaki. Didn't see a need for them to come here.
- Ikebukuro, where you can invite confidants to the planetarium. No reason to come here either
- Meiji Shrine. Uh...well, no reason because shrine
- It's literally named Chinatown haha I didn't give an alternate name for it in this fic.

Similarities and differences in the locations:

Yongen-Jaya vs Jule Halls

Similarities: Yongen-Jaya and Jule Halls both contain the residences of the protagonists and their guardians and children. There's a grocery store nearby. Batting cages are here too.

Differences: No laundromat mentioned. No bathhouse. Random playground near the Armstrong's house. No beloved Café Leblanc lmao. Also, Niki lives here too! As does AntFrost and Velvet. There's a rundown church here which Yongen-Jaya doesn't have. Phoenix SC is met here for Confidant events.

Valentine Hills vs Shibuya

Similarities: Both contain a movie theatre, both contain a diner where the PT usually meets up. Both are the heart of the story in their respective cities. Airsoft shop is still present in Valentine's. Big Bang Burger too. Kris Family targets students here. Underground shopping mall where Dream meets Bad for Confidant events occur here too. Triple Seven is still here, where Dream does some of Sappap's Confidant events. Dream applies for his Triple Seven job here. Yao Yi met here for most Confidant events. Florist is here too.

Differences: No CD shop – Dream watches movies on Netflix, so he rarely goes to the theatre as well. No beef bowl shop. Most of the other shops in the Underground Mall not mentioned. Tommy is met here for Confidant events instead of the arcade at Akihabara as with Shinya. Techno lives here. Ruby is met here for most Confidant events. Lotto counter no longer present.

Enderlands High vs Shujin Academy

Similarities: The schools where most of the PT study at. Has many campuses split into Practice Building, Classroom Block, Lab block, etc. Krones was the head of volleyball club as was Kamoshida. Principal Patterson is just as terrible as Principal Kobayakawa. Montgomery and Maruki are met here for Confidant events.

Differences: Enderlands High has many campuses not interconnected with sheltered walkways, unlike Shujin Academy. Dream can join clubs here unlike in the game. Niki is met here for some Confidant events. George is a student here while his counterpart isn't.

Bowarrow Street

Similarities: Nightlife district. Not much reason for them to come here tbvh. Honestly forgot what they did here lol

Differences: uh I guess Bar Newcomer isn't here anymore. And neither is the bookshop. No Chihaya replacement. No Ohya replacement either. No bar job.

Elytra vs Akihabara

Similarities: Electric Town. Sells electrical appliances and games and stuff.

Differences: No maid café. No anime merch. No gacha machines. Yao Yi is not met here for any Confidant events.

Beatty vs Kichijoji

Similarities: Both contain dart and billiards, the jazz club and that tiny café that the protags brought Akechi/Techno to eat at. Akechi/Techno is met here for most Confidant events. Sumire/Tubbo met here for most Confidant events.

Differences: No secondhand clothes shop. Most of the other shops are gone too I suppose. Bad is the one who introduces Dream to Beatty while it was Ryuji (Sapnap's counterpart) who introduces Joker to Kichijoji. Temple is no longer in Beatty

Creek Walk vs Kanda

Similarities: lol nothing really

Differences: Kanda houses a church while Creek Walk is the road leading up to a graveyard. No Hifumi replacement.

Oakoak vs Ginza

Similarities: none

Differences: Oakoak contains a hotpot restaurant while Ginza contains a sushi restaurant

Valleyberth vs Ichigaya

Similarities: Both contain a fishing pond where you can fish the respective Guardians.

Differences: I picture Valleyberth as more of a place where it's nearer the outskirts of the city rather than somewhere in the middle like Ichigaya is.

Lancer Lane vs Ueno

Similarities: Both are where the art gallery that Madarame/Marion had their exhibition. Both are where Yusuke/Skeppy's original houses are.

Differences: nothing much honestly

Helen Park vs Inokashira Park

Similarities: where A LOT of Confidants will meet up with you. Essentially the same especially with the big lake and the rowboats. Place where the school cleanup took place.

Differences: nothing much

Lara Stadium vs Odaiba

Similarities: where the stadium that was initially the lab once was before it was torn down. Site of Maruki/Montgomery's Palace. Location of the summer food fair.

Differences: Nothing

Pointe Boulevard vs Harajuku

Similarities: Shopping street.

Differences: Pointe split into high budget streets and low budget streets. There is also a Pointe Jetty nearby, and can hear the waves from the boulevard itself

Reedveld vs Shinagawa

Similarities: Aquarium is located here.

Differences: nothing

Vance Tower vs Asakusa Skytree

Similarities: act as observation decks to spend time with Confidants

Differences: none

Mauve Beach vs Miura Beach

Similarities: beaches where the protags have their beach episode

Differences: dream fishes for the beach guardian at mauve beach while no such sidequest exists for the game. This place is more like modelled after shichiri beach honestly

OST

Palace Themes:

Krones' Castle: [King, Queen, Slave](#) + [King, Queen, Slave – Another Version](#) + [Collapse of Lust](#)

Marion's Museum: [A Woman](#) + [A Woman – Another Version](#)

Kris' Bank: [Price](#) + [Price – Another Version](#)

Gina's Pyramid: [The Days When My Mother Was There](#) + [The Days When My Mother Was There – Another Version](#) + [Collapse of Wrath](#)

Lee's Spaceport: [Sweatshop](#) + [Sweatshop – Another Version](#)

Armstrong's Casino: [The Whims of Fate](#)

Singh's Ark: [Ark](#) + [Collapse of Arrogance](#)

Sending Singh's calling card: [Wake Up, Get Up, Get Out There Instrumental](#)

Mementos: [Mementos \(Vanilla\)](#) + [Mementos Upper Layer](#) + [Mementos Middle Layer](#) + [Mementos Lower Layer](#) + [Freedom and Security](#) + [Mementos New Layer](#)

Montgomery's Laboratory: [Gentle Madman](#) + [Out of Kindness](#)

Safe Room: [Have a Short Rest](#)

Stealing Treasure: [Life Will Change Instrumental](#) + [Life Will Change \(Vocal Ver.\)](#) + [I Believe \(Montgomery Palace\)](#)

Ruler confessions: [Regret](#)

Mementos target confessions: [I'll Face Myself](#)

Battle Themes:

Normal Shadow battle: [Take Over](#) + [Last Surprise](#)

Persona Awakening: [Awakening](#) + [Willpower](#)

Miniboss Fight/Mementos Target fight: [Keeper of Lust](#)

Palace Ruler fight: [Blooming Villain](#)

Shadow Gina fight: [I'll Face Myself – Another Version](#)

Battle Arena in Armstrong's Palace: [Prison Labour](#)

George fight: [I'll Face Myself - Reincarnation](#)

Singh fight: [Rivers in the Desert](#)

Holy Grail initial fight: [A New World Fool](#)

Holy Grail rematch: [The Almighty](#)

Yaldabaoth fight: [Yaldabaoth](#) + [Our Beginning](#)

Wither fight: [Master of Tartarus](#)

Montgomery fight: [Keep Your Faith](#) + [Throw Away Your Mask](#) + [Swear To My Bones](#)

Environment:

Classroom (normal): [Is It Boring](#)

Classroom (exam): [Life Goes On](#)

Daytime: [Tokyo Daylight](#) + [Tokyo Emergency](#)

Evening: [Beneath the Mask](#) + [Alone](#) + [Night Sky Full of Stars](#)

Rain: [Beneath the Mask – Rain](#)

Arcade/Shopping Mall: [Junes Theme](#)

Snowy Day: [Snowflakes](#)

3rd Semester: [So Happy World](#)

Darts and Billiards: [Kichijoji 199X](#)

Jazz Club: [No More What Ifs](#)

Velvet Room: [Aria of the Soul](#)

Character Themes:

Smallishbeans/Joel: [Butterfly Kiss](#)

Philza: [Layer Cake](#)

Montgomery: [The Ideal and the Real](#) + [The Ideal and the Real End Version](#)

Palace Rulers (in general): [Blood of Villain](#)

Mementos Targets: [Desire](#)

Gaining a Persona upgrade: [Swear To My Bones](#)

DNF music:

4th of July: [Girl of the Hollow Forest](#)

Confession: [Path of Redemption](#)

George traitor reveal: [Omen](#) (Bad Ending) + [Betrayal](#) (Good Ending)

George saves the Thieves: [A Poignant Reminder](#) + [Loss](#)

2/2 scene: [Dark Caves](#) (Good ending) + [Silent Snow](#) + [Memories](#) (True Ending)

Author's Note Themes:

Author's Note 1: [Our Light](#)

Author's Note 2: [Colours Flying High](#)

Author's Note 3: [Royal Days \(Another Version\)](#)

Author's Note 4: [No More What Ifs](#)

Author's Note 5: [With the Stars and Us](#)

Tense music:

[Erosion](#)

[Escape](#)

[High Pressure](#)

[Operation: Start](#)

[Restlessness](#)

[Run!](#)

[RUN RUN RUN](#)

[Suspicion](#)

[Tension](#)

Relaxing music:

[Alright](#) + [Alright \(Elp\)](#)

[Break It Down](#) + [Break It Down \(Elp\)](#)

[Hatsumode](#)

[Memories of a Summer Day](#)

[Sunset Bridge](#)

Happy music:

[Joy](#)

[Like a Dream Come True](#)

[What's Going On](#)

Sad music:

[Alleycat](#)

[Confession – Secret](#)

[I Will Give You](#)

[Memories/Kioku](#)

[Traumerei](#)

Miscellaneous:

[A Moment of Rest](#)

[Every Day Days](#)

[Hawaii](#)

[My Homie](#)

[Nothingness](#)

[Reasoning/Deduction](#)

[Trick](#)

[Wicked Plan](#)

Cryptograms

Here's the cipher where original letter = replaced letter:

A = D, B = I, C = O, D = E, E = P, F = W, G = Y, H = M, I = K, J = B, K = A, L = Q, M = U, N = G, O = R, P = F, Q = T, R = Z, S = X, T = J, U = L, V = S, W = N, X = C, Y = H, Z = V

Here're the cryptograms:

1.

"Hrl agrn, k'sp ippg jmkgakgy," Floris says. Clay shifts his weight from one foot to the other.

"Dirlj...xrupjmkgy xjzdgyp."

"Xrupjmkgy xjzdgyp?"

"Hrl zpupui pz jmdj edh dj jmp fdza oqpdglf? Nmpg np wkzxj upj yprzyp?"

"Hpdm?" Clay narrows his eyes. What is Floris talking about?

"Zpupui pz nmpg I jrqe hrl mp ndx orqlziqkge?"

"Hpx?" A sinking feeling plagues Clay's stomach.

"Mp zpxfrgepe, ekeg'j mp? Mp zpxfrgepe"

"Mp...?" Clay shakes his head. "K erg'j zpupui pz. Ilj pspg kw mp eke, nmdj..." His eyes go wide. "Gr..."

"Mp eke. K'u xlzp rw kj. Rgqh fprfqp nmr'sp yrgp kgjr jmp upjdspxp ipwrzp odg mpdz up," Floris says stubbornly. "Urzprspz, mp agpn xrupjmkgy mp ekeg'j jrr, idoa nmpg mp 'dndapgpe' mkx fpzxrgd kg ykgd'x fdqdop. mp odqqpe hrl ih hrlz orepgdup pspg jmrlym hrl ekeg'j jpqq mku lgjkq np ipydg jmp kgwkqjzdkrg."

"Nmdj er hrl updg, wqrzqx? Nmdj dzp hrl xdhkgy?" Clay's breathing quickens, his heart

pounding. Floris can't possibly mean what he thinks he means.

"K'u xdhkgy jmdj yprzyp orlqe spzh npqq ip jmp iqdoa udx," Floris says. "Kw jmdj'x xr, jmpg pspzhjmkgy udapx xpgxp. Pspzh xkgyqp jmkgy. Pspg mrn ykgd wrlge lx."

"Mrn ykgd wrlge lx?"

"Jmkga dirlj kj. Xmp ulxj mdsp wrlge rlj dirlj lx lxkgy mpz jpomgrqrykodq agrn-mrn orgxkepzkggy mrn xmp gspsz qpdspz mpz zrru ipwrzp brkgkgy lx. K'e xdh xruprgp'x fmrgrp ndx ilyype, oqdh."

"Ilyype? Ilj hrl xdke jmdj xmp gspsz qpdspz..." Realization dawns on Clay. He can hardly move, frozen to the spot. The evidence is staring at him right in the face, but he just...he *refuses* to believe it. There's no way that *he* can be the Black Mask. *No fucking way.*

"Oqdh, k agrn--"

Clay grunts.

"Np xmrlqe appf rlz yldze lf dzrlge mku," Floris says. "K erg'j agrn nmdj mp'x fqdggkgy, dxxrokdjkggy nkjm lx qkap jmdj."

2.

"Wkzxj rw dqg, jdap d qrra dj jmkx," Gina says, pulling up a window. Upon reading the lines, Clay realizes that it's a transcript.

"Eke hrl ypj jmkx wzru hrlz izrjmpz'x fmrgrp?"

Gina nods, wheeling away to look up at him. "Mrn'e hrl agrn?"

"Ipodlxp np xlxfpoj mku jrr," Floris says. "Np blxj ekeg'j mdsp mdze pskepgop."

"K xpp." Gina turns back to her computer. The message in the transcript is clear: Jmkx fpzxrg, jmp jzdkjr, mdx jr akqq jmp qdpep rw jmp fmdgjr jmkpspx dge wrzop jmp zpxj jr xodjppz, jr ip fkoape rww rgp ih rgp kg jmp xmdernx. Jmp qdpep nkqq ip akqqpe elzkggy tlpjkrkggy dge zpfzrjpe jr mdsp oruukjpe xlkokep. Jmp orgjkglype upgjdq xmljerngx nkqq ip iqdupe rg jmp fmdgjr jmkpspx kg mkekgy, nkjm jmp fliqko grgp jmp nkxpz.

The perfect crime.

"Ykgd..."

"K erg'j ndgj yprzyp jr er jmkx. K odg'j qpj mku xlqqh mkx mdgex nkjm...K blxj odg'j qpj mku akqq dghrgp," Gina says. "Fqpdxp, hrl mdsp jr xjrf mku."

Clay shifts his weight from one foot to the other. "Nmpg'x mp fqdggkgy rg erkgy jmkx?"

Gina bites her lip. "Rg grspuipz jnpgjkpjm."

"Jmpg jmdj erpxg'j qpdsp lx d qrra jr orup lf nkjm d fqdg," Floris muses.

"Ykgd, k'e qkap hrl jr orgjkglype fzrskekgy lx nkjm kgwrzudjkrgr dirlj yprzyp'x dojkrgr. Dx ulom dx hrl odg ydjmpz," Clay says. He exhales loudly, nostrils flaring. "Np'qq qpj hrl agrn rw d fqdg dx xrrg dx np odg jmkga rw rgp."

"Jmdgax," Gina says, nodding. "Jmdga hrl xr ulom. Zpdqqh."

“Kj’x gr fzriqpu,” Clay says with a wave of his hand. “k nrg’j ekp jmdj pdxkqh, dge k nrg’j qpj yprzyp ekzjh mkx mdgex dgh urzp jmdg mp dqzpdeh mdx; jmdj, I odg fzrukxp hrl.”

Bloopers (scenes that I wrote halfway and scrapped them):

1. (One of Nick’s Confidant/S. Link events)

“Mom.”

Clay is sitting at the dining table opposite Mrs Armstrong, pen poised in the air, trying his hardest to concentrate despite the downpour outside. He looks up at the voice, seeing Nick making his way down the staircase.

Mrs Armstrong barely looks up from where she is looking over some documents. She merely hums, a dismissive note in her tone.

“Mom, I...I have to talk to you.”

“I don’t think there’s anything to talk about.”

A moment of silence passes between them. Clay peers up from his homework, trying to meet Nick’s eyes for cues, but he gives none. Instead, it seems that Nick is not even sparing him any attention.

“Mom.”

Mrs Armstrong looks up from her paper, annoyance clearly written on her face. “Nicholas, I am currently looking through some important documents right now, so if it’s not some circular that needs signing, then-“

“Mom, can we talk? About...about Neil.”

Mrs Armstrong flinches at the sound of his name. “You didn’t seem to care for him the last time.”

“But Mom, you have to accept the fact that Neil is dead,” Nick says, wringing his hands. “You can’t keep pretending that he’s...living on through me or whatever.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, Nicholas.”

“Mom! Why won’t you listen to me?”

Mrs Armstrong slams her laptop lid. Clay jumps out of his skin, watching the scene unfold with bated breath. Mrs Armstrong’s jaw clenches, her face taut, as if she is going to start railing at Nick any moment now.

“Neil is gone, and he’s not going to come back, ever,” Nick says, running a hand through his hair. “I...I don’t want to be subjected to this anymore. Every time I do something, Neil comes up. It’s exhausting.”

“I’m not-“

“Mrs Armstrong,” Clay says, stepping in. “Please listen to Nick for now.”

Mrs Armstrong huffs, then sits back down. Nick shoots Clay a grateful look.

“It’s not we have to change our lifestyle or anything drastic like that, but I was hoping that you’d, you know, care about me more. Like, care about me for me, and not because I’m some vessel for Neil to live on in or something.”

“What would you like me to do, then?” Mrs Armstrong says.

“Just to treat me like me, Nick. Maybe we can remember Neil sometime, but just...not all the time.”

Mrs Armstrong looks tired. Against the light of her laptop, her eye bags seem even darker. She pinches the bridge of her nose.

“I see. I hadn’t any idea you were feeling that way,” Mrs Armstrong says, and Clay can hear a certain sincerity in her voice. “Very well, I will think about it.”

Not exactly what Clay wants to hear, or probably Nick, for that matter, but at this point in time, it seems to be the best they can ask out of her for now. It’s not easy for one to get over someone’s death and one should not push the process of grief, but if someone else is being hurt terribly in the meantime, then maybe it’s time to speak up, to support each other through the mess rather than continuing with their coping mechanisms that will only hurt the other.

2. (One of Yao Yi’s Confidant/S. Link events)

...what are you doing?” Yao Yi is typing something into her phone. Fingers flying across the keyboard, Clay may add. When she’s done, she holds it up to him, the red and black of the Phan-Site suddenly a lot more glaring than Clay is used to seeing.

“What the hell have you done?” A warning is posted on the forum against the actor, about how the Phantom Thieves are going to steal his heart and make him pay for his crimes.

“No need to get so upset.” Yao Yi pouts. “I’m just doing you a favour, you know, as your image manager. Now when you change his heart, everyone will be thanking you. You’ll see.”

“Delete it right now.”

“What? No,” Yao Yi shakes her head. “What’s wrong with you? I’m *helping* you.”

“You are *not* helping,” Clay says firmly. “Until I see definite proof that this guy has committed some atrocious deed, I’m not changing his heart.”

“B-But-“

“No buts.”

“You’re being really mean, you know that?”

“Oh, don’t play that card,” Clay mutters, palm against his forehead. “Listen, I want you to get rid of it right now. I’m telling it to you straight here that we’re not going to steal his heart.”

Yao Yi looks like she’s on the verge of tears, and Clay prays that she doesn’t cry because he really, *really* doesn’t want to be dealing with a sobbing girl in the middle of a respectable dining establishment.

“I’m not,”

3. (Random safe room scene in Kris' bank)

"Get some reprieve. Everyone's tired."

"And maybe we can leave the bank from there," Bad says.

Dream shifts his weight from foot to foot. "I think we should look for the door first. Get the cardkeys out of the way."

"He's right," Fundy says. "We don't know what the cardkeys will turn into if we leave the Metaverse with it. For all we know, it may disappear and we'll never get to the Treasure."

"Okay then," Skeppy says, adjusting his mask. "Just find the door and *use* the cardkeys, right?"

"Yeah," Dream says. "After that, we can return to the safe room Eret mentioned and see whether we can leave from there. If there's a window, we can at least drop a Pearl to get out."

4a. (One of AntFrost's Confidant/S. Link events)

"I would like to improve my speaking skills," Clay reads from the paper pinned up on the board. The first of the several requests that he has to complete on behalf of Ant's previous guardian. "I can't seem to make any friends because I don't know what to say." Written by Ann Gaiden. No contact number nor address, though.

Ant meows in response. It struts over to the door and waits there, as if beckoning Clay to follow. Clay stuffs the note into his pocket and follows Ant out the church.

Ant leads him down the sidewalk, past several houses, finally stopping at one with a nice patio and a freshly-mowed lawn. Ant meows, planting itself beside the mailbox.

"That person stays here?"

Ant mewls in response and licks its paw.

4b. (One of AntFrost's Confidant/S. Link events)

"Every time I try to make friends, I always chase them away because I don't know how to speak to people."

This is a hard one. Clay glances down at Ant, who merely meows, licking at its paw. He had promised Ant to help out with one last request before leaving for Hawaii, but he certainly hadn't anticipated something quite like this.

She, apparently, is a student of Enderlands High, which she so graciously decided to provide in her post-it note. Clay has never seen her name before; she must be from other classes or years.

"Well," Clay says, stuffing the note into his pocket. "Let's get moving."

Ant purrs and leads the way, mainly sticking to the sidewalk and moving at a pace that Clay can keep up with. Ant eventually stops outside a house with a modern look, its baby pink walls

accentuated with its white roof and windowsills lined with potted plants.

This must be the place. Clay isn't sure what to expect. Is this girl going to be...

5. (One of TapL's Confidant/S. Link events)

"Hey, can I talk to you about something?"

Clay already has an inkling as to what Harvey has in mind. "What is it?"

"Well, it's about the company," Harvey says, kicking at a pebble and watching it roll down the slope, plopping into the water. "I'm not sure who else I can turn to about this...this kind of thing."

"Well, yeah. Sure. I'll help you the best I can," Clay says, nodding.

"Thanks man," Harvey says with the widest grin on his face. "

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